Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

MARCH

35 Cents

Too Soon to Die

by TOM GODWIN

The Queer Ones

by LEIGH BRACKETT

WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

GORDON R. DICKSON

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Venturings

• . . . On the other hand, possibly not. So science fiction has often said. And now as this issue goes to press, a scientist comes along with a speculation that rivals the best that s f has offered. Robert Leon Carroll, a Navy scientist, believes that from cold atoms energy can be derived which will make possible speeds faster than light—and the Air Force thinks enough of his theory to grant him the money to try to prove it! If he does, he will have made a monumental contribution to science; he will also have brought dismay to those who believe Man is already going to hell quite speedily enough. As for us, we must admit that we wait for word with wonder, hope—and a measure of concern.

• On the other hand . . . . if Mr. Carroll is successful, within a relatively short time we will doubtless be hearing that a Russian stableboy stumbled on the discovery years ago. That such a report will be true seems about as unlikely as the chance of this country turning fascist in the foreseeable future. Of course neither is an *impossibility*—and both, therefore, are fit subjects for the s f writer. For example, see "Vengeance for Nikolai," by WALTER M. MILLER, JR. Mr. Miller flatly does not believe we will be taken over by the Blue Shirts; further, as a Catholic and a thinking, free man, he finds Communism and fascism equally abhorrent. As a writer, however, in this grim, remotely possible future he finds material for a penetrating study of people. Marya, with her grief for her dead baby, her hate, and her love of Russia's earth— ". . . it has the blood of my baby in it; don't speak to me of sides, or leaders, or politics . . ." —Marya is surely a facet of Man. She is also the central figure in a powerful story.

• On the other hand . . . there are, we think, several powerful stories in this issue. Take, for example, "Too Soon to Die," by Tom Godwin, which we consider an adventure story on a truly grand scale. One thing bothers us, though—the rigors of life on Ragnarok are presented with such unsettling realism that we worry about the possible over-enthusiasm of Mr. Godwin's research. From the rough back country of the Southwest he has written to promise us more stories, which delights us. But please, Mr. Godwin, beware of the Prowlers. . . .

• On the other foot . . . . is where James Thurber seems to be trying to shove the shoe. In a just published fable, he offers a most disturbing moral. "The noblest study of mankind is Man, says Man," Mr. Thurber observes. We have no idea who or what else Mr. Thurber thinks might be judging our studies, but we do hope that most of you out there *are* of the species Man, and therefore willing to believe that the following stories of people have a noble subject. —RPM

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Cover by Dick Shelton, illustrating "The Queer Ones"

Interior illustrations by Giunta

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER *Robert P. Mills*, EDITOR

Venture Science Fiction Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 2, Whole No. 2, March, 1957. Published bi-monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. 12-issue subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Pan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N.H. Editorial and General offices, 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N.Y. Application for second class mail privileges pending at the Post Office at Concord, N.H. under the act of March 3, 1879.

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TOO SOON TO DIE

by TOM GODWIN

The monstrous Gerns had left them to die—
left them on a hell-world of gigantic wolf-like prowlers,
of 1.5 gravity that dragged at aching bodies, and seasons
that withered life or froze it. It was unthinkable that
they could strike back at the Gerns 200 lightyears away—
it was impossible that they could even survive . . . impossible

The Constellation, *bound for Athena with eight thousand colonists aboard, had not expected attack from the Gerns. There had been no indication when it left Earth that the cold war with the Gern Empire would suddenly flare into violence, and the world of Athena was a Terran discovery, four hundred lightyears from the outer boundary of the Gern Empire.*

The two Gern cruisers appeared without warning and attacked with silent, vicious efficiency, demolishing the Constellation's *stern and rendering her driveless and powerless. Her single obsolete blaster fired once in futile defense and was instantly destroyed, together with the forward control room.*

Within seconds the Constellation *was helpless and leaderless, her air regenerators lifeless. Gerns boarded her and a Gern officer delivered the ultimatum in quick, brittle words:*

"A state of war now exists between the Gern Empire and Earth. This section of space, together with the planet Athena, is claimed as part of the Gern Empire.

"This ship has invaded Gern territory and fired upon a Gern cruiser, but we are willing to extend a leniency not required by the circumstances. Terran technicians and skilled workers in certain specific fields can be of use to us in the factories we shall build on Athena. The others will not be needed and there is not room on the cruisers to take them.

"You will be divided into two groups, the Acceptables and the Rejects. The Rejects will be taken by the cruisers to an Earth-type planet near here and left, together with ample supplies. The cruisers

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will then take the Acceptables on to Athena.

"This division will split families but there will be no resistance to it. At the first instance of rebellion the offer will be withdrawn and the cruisers will go on their way again."

There was no choice for the colonists. The air was already growing stale and within twenty hours they would start smothering to death. The division was made.

Six hours later the Rejects, four thousand of them, stood in a bleak, rocky valley, a 1.5 gravity dragging at them like a heavy burden, and watched the cruisers roar away into the gray sky. A moaning wind sent the alkali dust swirling in cold, bitter clouds and things like gigantic black wolves could already be seen gathering in the distance.

They realized fully, then, what had happened. They were on Ragnarok, the hell-world, and their abandonment there was intended to be a death sentence for all of them.

The bright blue star dimmed and dawn touched the sky, bringing with it a coldness that frosted the steel of the rifle in John Prentiss's hands and formed beads of ice on his gray mustache. There was a stirring in the area behind him as the weary Rejects in his group prepared to face the new day. A child whimpered from the cold. There had not been time the evening before to gather enough wood—

"Prowlers!"

The warning cry came from an outer guard as the enormous wolf-like black shadows materialized out of the dark dawn, their white fangs gleaming in their devils' faces as they ripped through the outer guard line. Prentiss's rifle licked out thin tongues of flame as he added his fire to that of the inner guards. The prowlers came on, breaking through, but four of them went down and the others swerved by the fire so that they struck only the outer edge of the area where the Rejects were grouped.

At that distance they blended into the dark ground so that he could not find them in the sights of his rifle. He could only watch helplessly in the dawn's dim light and see a dark-haired woman caught in their path, trying to run with a child in her arms and already knowing it was too late. For a moment her white face was turned in hopeless appeal to the others. Then she fell, deliberately, going to the ground with her child beneath her so that her body would protect it from the prowlers. A man was running toward her, slow in the high gravity, an axe in his hands and his cursing a raging, impotent snarl.

The prowlers passed over her, pausing for an instant as they

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slashed the life from her, and raced on again. They vanished into the outer darkness, the farther guards firing futilely. Then there was silence but for the distant, hysterical sobbing of a woman.

It had happened within seconds; the fifth prowler attack that night and by far the mildest. . . .

Full dawn had come by the time John Prentiss replaced the two guards killed by the last attack and made the rounds of the other guards. He came back by the place where the prowlers had killed the woman, walking wearily against the pull of the gravity. She lay with her dark hair tumbled and stained with blood, her white face turned up to the reddening sky, and he saw her clearly.

It was Irene.

He stopped, gripping the rifle hard, not feeling the rear sight as it cut into his hand.

Irene . . . He had not known she was on Ragnarok. His one consolation had been the thought that she and Billy were safe among the Acceptables . . .

There was the sound of footsteps and a bold-faced girl in a red skirt stopped beside him, her glance going over him curiously.

"The little boy," he asked, "do you know if he's all right?"

"The prowlers cut up his face but he'll be all right," she said. "I came back after his clothes."

"Are you going to look after him?"

"Someone had to." She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I was soft enough to elect myself for the job. Why—was his mother a friend of yours?"

"She was my daughter," he said. "I didn't know she was on Ragnarok till just now."

"Oh." The bold, brassy look was gone from her face for a moment, like a mask that had slipped. "I'm sorry. And I'll take care of Billy."

The first objection to his assumption of leadership occurred an hour later. The prowlers had withdrawn with the coming of full daylight and wood had been carried from the trees to renew the fires. Mary, one of the volunteer cooks, was asking two men to carry water when he approached. The smaller man picked up one of the clumsy containers, hastily improvised from canvas, and started for the creek, but the thick-chested man did not move.

"People are hungry and cold and sick," Mary said. "Aren't you going to help?"

The man continued to squat by the fire, his hands extended to its warmth. "Name somebody else," he said.

"But—"

Mary looked at Prentiss in uncertainty and he went to the thick-chested man, knowing there would be violence and welcoming it as something to help drive away the vision of Irene's pale, cold face under the red sky.

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"She asked you to get her some water," he said. "Get it."

The man got quickly to his feet and swung to face him challengingly, his heavy shoulders hunched.

"You overlook one little point," he said. "No one has appointed you the head cheese around here. Now, there's the container you want filled, old timer, and there —" he made a small motion with one hand "—is the creek. Do you know what to do?"

"Yes," Prentiss said. "I know what to do."

He brought the butt of the rifle smashing up. It struck the man under the chin and there was a sharp cracking sound as his jawbone snapped. He slumped to the ground, his eyes glazing and his broken jaw askew.

"Now, go ahead and name someone else," Prentiss said to Mary. . . .

He found that the prowlers had killed seventy of his group during the night. One hundred more had died from the Hell Fever that seemed to follow quickly behind exposure on Ragnarok and killed within an hour.

He went to the group that had arrived on the second cruiser to urge them to combine with his own group in their forthcoming move into the woods, where there would be ample fuel for the fires and some protection from the wind.

He found a leader in the second group, as he had known he would. It was a characteristic of human nature that leaders should appear in times of emergency.

His name was Lake, a man with cold blue eyes under pale brows and a smile as bleak as moonlight on an arctic glacier, and he agreed that they should move into the woods at once. "We'll have to combine," he said. "The prowlers raised hell here last night and I don't want that to happen again."

When the brief discussion of plans was finished and Prentiss was ready to go, Lake said, "It might be of help if we knew more about Ragnarok, besides its name." He quoted dryly, " *'the last day of gods and men.'* "

"I was with the Dunbar Expedition that discovered Ragnarok," Prentiss said. "We didn't stay to study it very long—there wasn't any reason to. Six men died and we marked it on the chart as uninhabitable. The Gerns knew it—when they left us here they were giving us death."

"Yes." Lake looked out across the camp, at the dead and the dying and the snow whipping from the frosty hills. "But it's too soon to die," he said.

The dead were buried in shallow graves and men set to work building crude shelters among the trees. Inventory was taken of the promised "ample supplies" which

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were no more than the few personal possessions that each Reject had been permitted to take along. There was very little food and inventory of the firearms and ammunition showed the total there to be discouragingly small.

There were a few species of herbivores on Ragnarok, the woods-goats in particular, but they would have to learn how to make and use bows and arrows as soon as possible.

An overcast darkened the sky and at noon black storm clouds came driving in from the west. Efforts were intensified to complete the move before the storm broke. Lake's group established itself beside his and by late afternoon they were ready.

The rain came at dark, a roaring downpour. The wind rose to a velocity that made the trees lean, and hammered and ripped at the hastily built shelters. Many of them were destroyed. The rain continued, growing colder and driven in almost horizontal sheets by the wind. One by one, the fires went out.

The rain turned to snow at midnight. Prentiss walked through it wearily, forcing himself on. He was no longer young—he was fifty—and he had had little rest.

He had known, of course, that successful leadership would involve more effort and sacrifice on his part than on the part of those he led. He had thought that what little he knew of Ragnarok might help the others to survive. So he had taken charge, tolerating no dispute to his claim as leader. It was, he supposed, some old instinct that forebids the individual to stand calmly aside and let the group die.

The snow stopped an hour later and the wind died to a frigid moaning. The clouds thinned, broke apart, and the giant star looked down upon the land with its cold, blue light. The prowlers came then, in sudden, ferocious attack.

Twenty got through, past the slaughtered south guards, and charged into the interior of the camp. As they did so, the call went up the guard lines:

"Emergency guards—*close in!*"

Above the triumphant, demoniac yammering of the prowlers came the screams of women, the thinner cries of children, and the shouting and cursing of men as they tried to fight the prowlers with knives and clubs. Then the emergency guards—every third man from the east and west guard lines—came plunging through the snow, firing as they came.

The prowlers launched themselves away from their victims and toward the guards, leaving a woman to stagger aimlessly, blood spurting from a severed artery and splashing dark in the starlight on the white snow.

The air was filled with the cracking of gunfire and the deep,

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savage snarling of the prowlers. Ten of them got through, leaving four dead guards behind them. The other ten lay where they had fallen and the emergency guards turned to hurry back to their stations, reloading as they went.

The wounded woman was lying in the snow and a first-aid man knelt over her. He straightened, shaking his head, and joined the others as they searched for the injured among the prowlers' victims.

They found no injured, only the dead. The prowlers killed with grim efficiency.

"John—"

Chiara, in charge of the shelters in that section of the camp, hurried toward him, his dark eyes worried under ice-coated brows.

"The wood is soaked," he said. "It's going to take some time to get the fires going again. There are babies and small children who lost their mothers when the prowlers attacked. They're already cold and wet—they'll freeze to death before we can get the fires going."

Prentiss looked at the ten prowlers lying in the snow and motioned toward them. "They're warm. Take out their guts."

"What—" Then Chiara's eyes lighted with comprehension and he hurried away without further question.

He went on, to make the rounds of the guard stations. When he returned he saw that his order had been obeyed.

The prowlers lay in the snow as before, their fangs bared and their devils' faces twisted in their dying snarls. But snug and warm inside them, children slept.

There were three hundred dead when the wan sun lifted to shine down on the white, frozen land; two hundred from Hell Fever and one hundred from prowler attacks.

Lake reported approximately the same number of dead and said, "Our guards were too far apart."

"We'll have to move everyone in closer together," Prentiss agreed. "And we're going to have to have a stockade wall around the camp."

All were moved to the center of the camp area that day and work was started on building a log wall around the camp. When the prowlers came that night they found a ring of guards and fires which kept most of them out.

Men moved heavily at their jobs as the days went by. Of all the forces on Ragnarok, the gravity was the worst. Even at night there was no surcease from it. Men fell into an exhausted sleep in which there was no real rest and from which they awoke tired and aching.

Each morning there would be some who did not awaken at all, though their hearts had been sound enough for living on Earth or Athena.

But overworked muscles

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strengthened and men moved with a little less laborious effort. The stockade wall was completed on the twentieth day and the camp was prowler-proof. The prowlers changed their tactics then and began lying in wait for the day-time hunting parties.

The days became weeks and the giant blue star that was the other component of Ragnarok's binary grew swiftly in size as it preceded the yellow sun earlier each morning. The season was spring; when summer came the blue star would be a sun as hot as the yellow sun and Ragnarok would be between them. The yellow sun would burn the land by day and the blue one would sear it by the night that would not be night. Then would come the brief fall, followed by the long, frozen winter when the yellow sun would shine pale and cold, far to the south, and the blue sun would be a star again, two hundred and fifty million miles away and invisible behind the cold yellow sun.

The cemetery was thirty graves long by thirty wide and more were added each day. To all the fact became grimly obvious: they were swiftly dying out and they had yet to face Ragnarok at its worst.

The old survival instincts asserted themselves and there were marriages among the younger ones. Among the first to marry was Julia, the girl who had volunteered to take care of Billy.

She stopped to talk to Prentiss one evening. She had changed in the past weeks. She still wore the red skirt, faded and patched, but her face was tired and thoughtful and no longer bold.

"Is it true, John," she asked, "that only a few of us might be able to have children here and that most of us who try to have children in this gravity will die for it?"

"It's true," he said. "But you knew that when you married."

"Yes . . . I knew it." There was a little silence, then, "All my life I've had fun and done as I pleased. The human race didn't need me and we both knew it. But now—none of us can be apart from the others or be afraid of anything. If we're selfish and afraid there will come a time when the last of us will die and there will be nothing on Ragnarok to show we were ever here.

"I don't want it to end like that for us. I want there to be children, to live on after we're gone. So I'm going to try to have children. I'm not afraid and I won't be."

When he did not reply she said, almost self-consciously, "Coming from me that all sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"It sounds wise and splendid, Julia," he said, "and it's what I thought you were going to say."

Full spring came and the vegetation burst into leaf and bud and bloom, quickly, for its growth in-

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stincts knew in their mindless ways how short was the time to grow and reproduce before the brown death of summer came. The prowlers were suddenly gone one day, to follow the spring north, and for a week men could work outside without protection.

Then the new peril appeared, the one they had not expected: the unicorns.

The stockade wall was a blue-black rectangle behind them and the blue star burned with the brilliance of a dozen moons, lighting the woods in blue shadow and azure light. Prentiss and the hunter walked a little in front of the two riflemen, winding to keep in the starlit glades.

"It was on the other side of the next grove of trees," the hunter said in a low voice. "Fred was dressing out the second woods-goat while I came in with the first one. He shouldn't have been over fifteen minutes behind me—and it's been over an hour."

They rounded the grove of trees. At first it seemed there was nothing before them but the empty, grassy glade. Then they saw it lying on the ground no more than twenty feet in front of them.

It was—it had been—a man. He was broken and stamped into hideous shapelessness.

For a moment there was dead silence, then the hunter whispered, *"What did that?"*

The answer came in the pounding of cloven hooves. A formless shadow beside the trees materialized into a monstrous charging bulk: a thing like a gray boar, eight feet tall at the shoulders with the starlight glinting along the curving, vicious length of its single horn.

"Unicorn!" Prentiss said, and jerked up his rifle.

The rifles cracked in a snarling volley. The unicorn squealed in fury and struck the hunter, catching him on its horn and hurling him thirty feet. One of the riflemen went down under the unicorn's hooves, his cry ending almost as soon as it began.

The unicorn ripped the sod in deep furrows as it whirled back to Prentiss and the remaining rifleman; not turning in the manner of four-footed beasts of Earth but rearing and spinning on its hind feet. It towered above them as it whirled, the tip of its horn fifteen feet above the ground and its front hooves swinging around like great clubs.

Prentiss shot again, his sights on what he hoped would be a vital spot, and the rifleman shot an instant later. The shots went true. The momentum of the unicorn's swing brought it on around, then it collapsed, falling to the ground with jarring heaviness.

"We got it!" the rifleman said. "We—"

It half scrambled to its feet and

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made a noise; a call that went out through the night like the blast of a mighty trumpet. Then it dropped back to the ground, to die while its call was still echoing from the nearer hills.

From the east came an answering trumpet blast, a trumpeting that was sounded again from the south and from the north. Then there came a low and muffled drumming, like the pounding of thousands of hooves.

The rifleman's face was blue-white in the starlight. "The others are coming—we'll have to run for it!"

He turned and began to run toward the distant bulk of the stockade.

"No!" Prentiss commanded, quick and harsh. "Not the stockade!"

The rifleman kept running, seeming not to hear him in his panic. He commanded again, "Not the stockade—you'll lead the unicorns into it!"

Again the rifleman seemed not to hear him.

The unicorns were coming into sight, converging in from the east and south and north, the sound of their hooves swelling to a thunder that filled the night. The rifleman would reach the stockade only a little ahead of them and they would go through the wall as though it had been made of paper. For a little while the area inside the stockade would be filled with the squealing of swirling, charging unicorns and the screams of the dying. It would be over very quickly and there would be no one left alive on Ragnarok.

There was only one thing for him to do.

He dropped to one knee so his aim would be steady and the sights caught the running man's back. He pressed the trigger and the rifle cracked viciously as it bucked against his shoulder.

The man spun and fell hard against the ground. He raised himself a little and looked back, his face white and accusing and unbelieving.

. . *"You shot me!"*

Then he fell forward again and lay without moving.

Prentiss turned back to face the unicorns and to look at the trees in the nearby grove. He saw what he already knew: they were young trees and too small to offer any escape for him. There was no place to run, no place to hide.

There was nothing he could do but wait; nothing he could do but stand in the blue starlight and watch the devil's herd pound toward him and think, in the last moments of his life, how swiftly and unexpectedly death could come to a man.

The unicorns held the Rejects prisoners in their stockade the rest of the night and all the next day. Lake had seen the shooting of the

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rifleman and had watched the unicorn herd kill John Prentiss and then trample the dead rifleman. He ordered a series of fires built around the inside of the stockade walls, quickly, for the unicorns were already moving on toward them.

The fires were started and green wood was thrown on to make them smoulder and smoke for as long as possible. Then the unicorns were just outside and every person in the stockade went into the concealment of the shelters.

Lake had already given his last order: There would be absolute quiet until and if the unicorns left; a quiet that would be enforced with fist or club whenever necessary.

The unicorns were still outside when morning came. The fires could not be refueled; the sight of a man moving within the stockade would bring the entire herd crashing through the walls. The hours dragged by, the smoke from the dying fires dwindling to thin streamers. The unicorns grew increasingly bolder and suspicious, crowding closer to the walls and peering through the openings between the logs.

The sun was setting when one of the unicorns trumpeted; a sound different to that of the call to battle. The others threw up their heads to listen, then they turned and drifted away. Within minutes the entire herd was gone out of sight through the woods, toward the north.

"That was close," Barber said, coming over to where Lake stood by the south wall. "It's hard to make two thousand people stay quiet hour after hour. Especially the children—they didn't understand."

"We'll have to leave," Lake said.

"Leave?" Barber asked. "We can make this stockade strong enough to hold out unicorns."

"Look to the south," Lake told him.

Barber did so and saw what Lake had already seen; a broad, low cloud of dust moving slowly toward them.

"Another herd of unicorns," Lake said. "John didn't know they migrated—the Dunbar Expedition wasn't here long enough to learn that. There will be herd after herd coming through and no time for us to strengthen the walls. We'll have to leave tonight."

Preparations were made for the departure; preparations that consisted mainly of providing each person with as much in the way of food and supplies as he or she could carry. In the 1.5 gravity of Ragnarok, that was not much.

They left when the blue star rose. They filed out through the northern gate and the rear guard closed it behind them. There was almost no conversation and some of them turned to take a last look at what had been the only home

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they had ever known on Ragnarok. Then they faced forward again, to the northwest, where the foothills of the plateau might offer them sanctuary.

Lake stopped to look back to the south when they had climbed the first low ridge. The cloud of dust was much nearer and it was coming straight toward the stockade.

They found their sanctuary on the second day; a limestone ridge honeycombed with caves. Men were sent back at once to carry the food and supplies to the new home.

When they returned with the first load they reported that the second herd of unicorns had broken down the walls and ripped the interior of the stockade into wreckage. He sent them back twice more to bring everything, down to the last piece of bent metal or torn cloth. They would find uses for all of it in the future.

The blue star became a small sun and the yellow sun blazed hotter. The last of the unicorns disappeared to the north and there were suddenly very few woodsgoats to be found. The final all-out hunt was made.

Preserving the meat was no problem—it was cut in strips and dried in the sun. But the hunters returned on the tenth day with an amount of meat far insufficient to last until fall brought the woodsgoats back from the north.

Lake instituted rationing much stricter than before and bleakly contemplated the specter of famine that hovered over his charges.

Early summer came, to wither and curl the leaves of trees, and there were twelve hundred of them. The weeks dragged by and summer solstice arrived. The heat reached its fiercest height then and there was no escape from it, not even in the caves. There was no night; the blue sun rose in the east as the yellow sun set in the west. There was no life of any kind to be seen; nothing moved across the burned land but the swirling dustdevils.

The death rate increased rapidly, especially among the children. The small supply of canned and dehydrated milk, fruit and vegetables was reserved exclusively for them but it was far too little.

Each day thin and hollow-eyed mothers would come to him to plead with him to save their children. ". . . it would take so little to save him—please—before it's too late—"

But the time was yet so long until fall would bring relief from the famine that he could only answer with a grim and final, "No."

And watch the last flickering hope fade from their eyes and watch them turn away, to go and sit beside their dying children.

There were six hundred and forty-three of them when the food

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theft was discovered. The thief was a man named Bemmon, one of the men who had been entrusted with storing the food supplies. His cache was found buried beside his pallet: dried meat, cans of milk, little plastic bags of dehydrated fruits and vegetables.

Lake summoned the four subleaders—Craig, Barber, Schroeder, Anders—and sent two of them to get Bemmon. Confronted by the evidence and by the grim quintet, Bemmon blustered briefly then broke and admitted his guilt.

"I won't ever do it again," he promised, wiping at his sweating face. "I swear I won't."

"I know you won't," Lake said. He spoke to Craig: "You and Barber take him to the lookout point."

"What—" Bemmon's protest was cut off as Craig and Barber took him by the arms and walked him swiftly away.

Lake turned to Anders. "Get a rope," he ordered.

Anders paled a little. "A—rope?"

"A rope. Do you object?"

"No," Anders said, a little weakly. "No—I don't object."

The lookout point was an outjutting spur of the ridge, six hundred feet from the caves and in full view of them. A lone tree stood there, its dead limbs thrusting like white arms through the brown foliage of the limbs that still lived. Craig and Barber waited under the tree, Bemmon between them. The lowering sun shone hot and bright on his face as he squinted back toward the caves at the approach of Lake and the other two.

He twisted to look at Barber. "What is it—what are you going to do?" There was the tremor of fear in his voice. "What are you going to do to me?"

Barber did not answer and Bemmon turned back to Lake. He saw the rope in Anders' hand for the first time and his face went white with comprehension.

"No!"

He threw himself back with a violence that almost tore him loose from the grip of Craig and Barber. "No—no!"

Schroeder stepped forward to help hold him and Lake took the rope from Anders. He fashioned a noose in it while Bemmon struggled and made panting, animal sounds, his eyes fixed in horrified fascination on the rope.

When the noose was finished he threw the free end of the rope over the white limb above Bemmon. He released the noose and Barber caught it, to draw it snug around Bemmon's neck.

Bemmon stopped struggling then and sagged weakly. For a moment it appeared that he would faint. Then he worked his mouth soundlessly until words came:

"You won't—you can't—really hang me?"

Lake spoke to him:

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"We're going to hang you. We trusted you and what you stole would have saved the lives of ten children. You've heard the children cry because they were so hungry. You've watched them become too weak to cry or care any more and you've watched them die.

"Your crime is the murder of ten children and the betrayal of our trust in you. If you have anything to say, say it now while you can."

"You can't—I have a right to live!" The words came quick and ragged with hysteria and he twisted to appeal to the ones who held him. "I have a right to live—you won't let him murder me."

Only Craig answered him, with a smile that was like the thin snarl of a wolf:

"Two of the children who died were mine."

Lake nodded to Craig and Schroeder, not waiting any longer. They stepped back to seize the free end of the rope and Bemmon screamed at what was coming, tearing loose from the grip of Barber.

Then his scream was abruptly cut off as he was jerked into the air. There was a cracking sound and he kicked spasmodically, his head setting grotesquely to one side.

Craig and Schroeder and Barber watched him with hard, expressionless faces but Anders

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turned quickly away, to be suddenly and violently sick.

"He was the first to betray us," Lake said. "Snub the rope and let him swing there. If there are any others like him, they'll know what to expect."

The blue sun rose as they went back to the caves. Behind them Bemmon swung and twirled aimlessly on the end of the rope. Two long, pale shadows swung and twirled with him; a yellow one to the west and a blue one to the east.

They numbered four hundred when the first rain came; the rain that meant the end of summer. The yellow sun moved southward and the blue sun shrank steadily. Grass grew again and the woods-goats returned. For a while there was meat in plenty and green herbs to prevent the diet deficiencies. Then the unicorns came, to make hunting dangerous, and behind them the prowlers to make hunting with bows and arrows almost impossible. But the supply of cartridges was at the vanishing point and the bowmen learned, through necessity, how to use their bows with increasing skill and deadliness.

They were prepared as best they could be when winter came. Wood had been gathered in great quantities and the caves had been fitted with crude doors and a ventilation system.

Men were put in charge of the food supplies. Lake took inventory at the beginning and held check-up inventories at irregular and unnounced intervals. He found no shortages. He had expected none —Bemmon had long since been buried but the rope still hung from the dead limb, the noose swinging and turning in the wind.

A Ragnarok calendar was made and the corresponding Earth dates marked on it. By a coincidence, Christmas fell near the middle of the winter. There was still the same rationing of food on Christmas day but little brown trees were cut for the children and decorated with such ornaments as could be made from the materials at hand.

There were toys under the trees, toys that had been patiently whittled from wood or made from scraps of cloth and prowler skins while the children slept. They were crude and humble toys but the pale, thin faces of the children were bright with delight when they beheld them. The magic of an Earth Christmas was recaptured for a few fleeting hours that day.

That night a child was born to the girl named Julia, on a pallet of dried grass and prowler skins. She asked for her baby before she died and they let her have it.

"I wasn't afraid, was I?" she asked. "But I wish it wasn't so dark—I wish I could see my baby before I go . . ."

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They took the baby from her arms when she was gone and removed from it the enveloping blanket that had concealed from her that it was still-born and pathetically deformed.

There were three hundred and fifty of them when the first violent storms of spring came. By then eighteen children had been born. Twelve were still-born, four were deformed and lived only a little while, but two were like any normal babies on Earth. There was one difference: the 1.5 gravity of Ragnarok did not seem to affect the Ragnarok-born children as it had the ones born on Earth.

There were deaths from Hell Fever again but two little boys and a girl contracted it and survived; the first proof that Hell Fever was not always and invariably fatal.

That summer there was not the famine of the first summer. There was sufficient meat and dried herbs; a diet rough and plain but adequate for those who had become accustomed to it.

Lake had taken a wife that spring and his son was born that following winter. It altered his philosophy and he began thinking of the future, not in terms of years to come but in terms of generations to come.

There was a man named West who had held degrees in philosophy on Earth and he said to Lake one night, as they sat together by the fire:

"Have you noticed the way the children listen to the stories of what used to be on Earth, what might have been on Athena, and what would be if only we could find a way to escape from Ragnarok?"

"I've noticed," he said.

"These stories already contain the goal for the future generations," West went on. "Someday, somehow, they will go to Athena, to kill the Gerns there and free the Terran slaves and reclaim Athena as their own."

He had listened to them talk of the interstellar flight to Athena as they sat by their fires and worked at making bows and arrows. Without the dream of someday leaving Ragnarok there would be nothing before them but the vision of generation after generation living and dying on a world that could never give them more than existence.

The dream was needed. But it, alone, was not enough. How long, on Earth, had it been from the Neolithic age to advanced civilization—how long from the time men were ready to leave their caves until they were ready to go to the stars?

Twelve thousand years.

There were men and women among the Rejects who had been specialists in various fields. There were a few books that had sur-

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vived the trampling of the unicorns, and the unicorn hides possessed an inner skin that would make a parchment for writing upon with ink made from the black lance-tree bark.

The knowledge contained in the books and the learning of the Rejects still living should be preserved for the future generations. With the advantage of that learning perhaps they really could, someday, somehow, escape from their prison and reclaim Athena.

"We'll have to have a school," he said, and told West of what he had been thinking.

West nodded in agreement. "We should get started with the school and the writings as soon as possible. Especially the writings. Some of the textbooks will require more time to write than Ragnarok will give the authors."

A school for the children was started the next day and the writing of the textbooks began. Two of the textbooks would be small but of such importance that it was decided to make four copies of each: Craig's *INTERIOR FEATURES OF A GERN CRUISER* and Schroeder's *OPERATION OF GERN BLASTERS*.

Spring came and the school and writings were interrupted until hot summer arrived, then they were resumed. There was another cessation of school and writing during the fall and they were resumed when winter came.

Year followed year, each much like the one that had preceded it but for the rapid aging of the Old Ones, as Lake and the others called themselves, and the growing up of the Young Ones. Five years passed and no woman among the Old Ones could any longer have children but there had been eight normal, healthy children born. Twelve years passed and there were twenty of the Old Ones left, ninety Young Ones, ten Ragnarok-born children of the Old Ones, and two Ragnarok-born children of the Young Ones.

West died in the winter of the fifteenth year and Lake was the last of the Old Ones. White-haired and aged far beyond his years, he was still leader of the group that had shrunk to ninety. He knew, before spring arrived, that he would not be able to accompany the younger ones on the hunts. He could do little but sit by his fire and feel the gravity dragging at his heart, warning him the end was near.

It was time he chose his successor.

He had hoped to live to see his son take his place but Jim was only thirteen. There was a scar-faced, silent boy of twenty among the Young Ones, not the oldest among them but the one who seemed to be the most thoughtful and stubbornly determined: John Prentiss's grandson, Bill Humbolt.

A violent storm was roaring

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outside the caves the night he told the others he wanted Bill Humbolt to be his successor. There were no objections and, with few words and without ceremony, he terminated his fifteen years of leadership.

He left the others, his son among them, and went back to the place where he slept. His fire was low, down to dying embers, but he was too tired to build it up again. He lay down on his pallet and saw, with neither surprise nor fear, that his time was much nearer than he had thought —it was already at hand.

He let the lassitude enclose him, not fighting it. He had done the best he could for the others and now the weary journey was ended.

The thought dissolved into the memory of the day fifteen years before. The roaring of the storm became the thunder of the Gern cruisers as they disappeared into the gray sky. Four thousand Rejects stood in the cold wind and watched them go, the children not yet understanding that they had been condemned to die. Somehow, his own son was among them—

He tried feebly to rise. There was work to do—a lot of work. . . .

Bill Humbolt thought of the plan early that spring and considered it during the coming months.

For him the dream of someday leaving Ragnarok and taking Athena from the Gerns was a goal toward which they must fight with unswerving determination. He could remember a little of Earth and he could remember the excitement and high hopes as the *Constellation* embarked for Athena. Quite clearly he remembered the day the Gerns left them on Ragnarok, the wind moaning down the barren valley, his father gone and his mother trying not to cry. Above all other memories was the one of the cold, dark dawn when his mother had held him and shielded him while the prowlers tore the life from her. She could have escaped them, alone. . . .

He would remember what the Gerns had done and hate them till the day he died. But to future generations the slow, uneventful progression of centuries might bring a false sense of security; might turn the stories of what the Gerns had done to the Rejects and the warnings of the Old Ones into legends and then into half-believed myths.

The Gerns would have to be lured to Ragnarok before that could happen.

He set the plan in action as soon as the spring hunting ended. Among the Young Ones was a man who had been fascinated by the study of electronics and had read all the material available on

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the subject and he went to him to ask him the question:

"George, could you build a transmitter—one that would send a signal to Athena?"

George laid down the arrow he had been straightening. "A transmitter?"

"I know it would have to be a normal-space transmitter—you couldn't possibly rig up a hyperspace transmitter," he said. "That would be enough—just a dot-dash transmitter."

"It would take two hundred years for the signal to get to Athena," George said. "And forty days for a Gern cruiser to come to Ragnarok through hyperspace."

"I know."

"So you want our showdown with the Gerns to come no later than two hundred years from now?" George asked.

"You're as old as I am," he said. "You still remember the Gerns and what they did, don't you?"

"I'm older than you," George said. "I was nine when they left us here. They kept my father and mother and my sister was only three. I tried to keep her warm by holding her but I couldn't. The Hell Fever got her that first night. Yes . . . I remember the Gerns and what they did."

"The generations to come won't have the memories that we have. Someday the Gerns will come to Ragnarok, even if only by chance and a thousand years from now, and our people might by then have forgotten what the Gerns did to us and would do to them. But if they know the Gerns will be here two hundred years from now they won't have time to forget."

"You're not supposed to sit in a cave and build an interstellar transmitter," George said. "But it doesn't take much power with the right circuit. There's wire and various electronic gadgets here. There's metal that can be heated and shaped into a water-driven generator. It *might* be done. . . ."

George completed the transmitter and generator five years later. It was set in operation and George observed its output as registered by the various meters, several of which he had made himself.

"Weak, but it will reach the Gern monitor station on Athena," he said. "It's ready to send—what do you want to say?"

"Make it something short," Humbolt told him. "Make it 'Ragnarok calling.' That will be enough to bring a Gern cruiser."

George poised his finger over the transmitting key. "This will set something in motion that will end two hundred years from now with either the Gerns or us going under. These signals can never be recalled."

"I think the Gerns will be the

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ones to go under," he said. "Send the signal."

"I think the same thing," George said. "I hope we're right. It's something we'll never know."

He began depressing the key.

A boy was given the job of sending the signals and the call went out twice daily toward distant Athena until winter froze the creek and stopped the waterwheel that powered the generator.

Humbolt sent out prospecting expeditions that year and in following years to search for metallic ores. The Dunbar Expedition had reported Ragnarok to be virtually devoid of minerals but he held to the hope that they might find enough metals to make weapons with which to meet the Gerns. Perhaps—fantastic hope though it was—even enough to plan the building of a small rocket ship with a hyperspace shuttle.

But no ores were found, other than iron ore of such low grade as to be useless. Neither did Ragnarok possess any fiber-bearing plants from which thread and cloth could be made.

At the end of ten years he was forced to accept the fact that Ragnarok did not and would never offer men more than the bare necessities of life. There would be no weapons or spaceship built in the future; there were no metals with which to build them. Ragnarok was a prison devoid of all means of escape but one: the possibility of luring the jailer to the cell door and overpowering him.

The sound had been made ten years before, and was being made every year, that would bring the jailer to investigate, with his weapons and with his keys.

He was forty-five and the last of the Young Ones when he awoke one night to find himself burning with the Hell Fever. He waited quietly. There was no reason to call to the others. They could do nothing for him and he had already done all he could for them. Now they must carry on, forty-nine men, women and children, and know that their last living link with the past was gone; that they were truly on their own.

They represented the lowest ebb in numbers of human life on Ragnarok but they were all Ragnarok-born and their number would increase. For a while, perhaps, the immediate problems of survival would overshadow everything else. But the books would keep and there would always be some who would study them. They would grow in numbers as the generations went by and the lapse would be short-lived; the time for the coming of the Gerns, when measured in terms of generations, was already near.

Forces were in motion that would bring the seventh genera-

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tion the trial of combat and the opportunity for freedom. But they, themselves, would have to achieve their own destiny.

He refused to let doubt touch his mind as to what that destiny would be. The men of Ragnarok were only furclad hunters who crouched in caves, but the time would come when they would walk as conquerers before beaten and humbled Gerns.

It was fifty years from the sending of the first signal and there were eighty-four of them. . . .

Dave West stopped under a tree, his bow and padded arrow in his hands, and repressed a sigh of weariness as he scanned the clearing before him. He was fifteen and it was his third day of the intensive training that began for each boy when he reached that age; the hunter-and-hunted game in which his father, at the moment, was a prowler he was stalking and which was in turn stalking him. It was a very important game but the sun was hot and it seemed to him his father was unduly demanding—

He heard, too late, the whisper of running feet behind him. He whirled, bringing up the bow with the arrow notched in the string, and fell sprawling backward over a root he had not seen.

His father's body struck him and he was knocked blinded and helpless under a rain of hard, open-handed blows. His efforts to resist were in vain and it seemed to him the lesson would never end.

When his father was finished he sat up dizzily and wiped the blood from his nose. His father squatted before him, his muscles rippling as he rocked on the balls of his feet and regarded him with thoughtful speculation.

"Didn't I tell you that prowlers will circle a hunter and attack him from the rear?" he asked.

"Yes, but I'd still have got you with the arrow if it hadn't been for that root," he defended himself.

His father reached out with a blow that caught him alongside the head and knocked him rolling in a blaze of white light.

"What did I tell you about watching your step?" he asked.

He sat up and gingerly held his hand to his ear. "To pay attention so I won't ever trip over anything. Next time I will."

He got to his feet to retrieve the arrow he had dropped, moving more quickly than before and with his desire to stop and rest forgotten.

His nose was still bleeding and all the other places still hurt but it never occurred to him to feel the slightest resentment toward his father. His father was doing what all fathers did with their sons: teaching him how to survive. Soon he would have to hunt

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real prowlers and unicorns and they didn't give careless hunters a second chance—they killed them.

He wiped the blood from his nose again and looked at his father. "I'm ready," he said. "This time I'm going to make a dead prowler out of you."

It was one hundred years from the sending of the first signal and there were two hundred and ninety-four of them. . . .

"You can kill prowlers and unicorns," Leader John Lake said, "but killing Gerns is harder to do."

The group of boys he addressed had recently and successfully gone through their first hunting season. They had proven they could face anything that walked on Ragnarok. Duane Craig answered with the confidence of youth:

"An arrow will go through a Gern."

"If you get the chance to shoot it. But what do you think the Gern would be doing? Suppose the Gerns came today—what would you do?"

Duane Craig's answer came without hesitation: "Fight."

"An arrow won't go through a steel cruiser. One of their turret blasters could kill every human being on Ragnarok in one sweep."

"Then what should we do?" Duane asked.

"That's what you're going to learn next," he said. "You've learned how to kill prowlers and unicorns. Now you'll learn how to kill bigger game—Gerns. They'll be here in a hundred years for certain—a great many of your grandchildren will be alive yet when they come.

"But if you don't learn how to kill Gerns now you may never have any grandchildren. All of you know why—the Gerns might come tomorrow."

It was one hundred and twenty-five years from the sending of the first signal and there were five hundred and fifty-eight of them. . . .

Bunker led the way into the starlit night just outside the mouth of the cave, his twelve pupils following him. They seated themselves beside him, ranging in age from a fourteen-year-old boy down to a girl of six, and waited for him to speak.

He pointed to the sky, where the group of stars called the "Athena constellation" blazed high in the east.

"There, at the tip of the Athena arrowhead, is Athena," he said. "But it's on beyond that star you see, so far that we can't see Athena's sun at all, so far that it takes light two hundred years to reach us from there.

"It will still be another seventy-five years before our first signal gets to Athena and the Gerns

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learn we are here. Why is it, then, that you and all the other groups of children have to study reading and writing and have to learn about all sorts of things you can't eat or wear, like history and physics and the way to fire a Gern blaster?"

The hand of every child went up. He selected eight-year-old Fred Humbolt. "Tell us, Freddy."

"Because we don't know when the Gerns will come," Freddy said. "In hyperspace their cruisers can travel a lightyear every five days. One of their cruisers might pass by only forty or fifty lightyears away and drop into normal space for some reason and pick up our signal. Then they would be here in only eight or nine days. So we have to know all about them and how to fight them because there aren't very many of us."

The little girl said, "The Gerns will come to kill part of us and make slaves out of the rest, like they did with the others a long time ago. They're awful mean and awful smart and we have to be smarter than they are."

The oldest boy, Steve Lake, was still watching the constellation of Athena.

"I hope they come," he said. "I hope they come just as soon as I'm old enough to kill them."

"How would a Gern cruiser look if it came at night?" Freddy asked. "Would it come from toward Athena?"

"It probably would," Bunker answered. "You would look toward Athena and you would see its rocket blast as it came down, like a bright trail of fire—"

A bright trail of fire burst suddenly into being, coming from the constellation of Athena and lighting up the woods and their startled faces as it arced down toward them.

"It's them!" a treble voice exclaimed, and there was a quick flurry of movement among the children.

Then the light vanished, leaving a faint glow where it had been.

"Only a meteor," Bunker said as he turned to the children.

He saw with deep satisfaction that none of them had run and that the older boys had shoved the smaller children behind them and were standing in a resolute little line, rocks in their hands with which to ward off the Gerns.

It was one hundred and fifty years from the sending of the first signal and there were twelve hundred and eighty of them. . . .

Frank Schroeder opened the book to a fresh parchment page and dipped the pen in the clay bottle of lance-tree ink. What he would write would be only the observations of an old man who had recently transferred leadership to someone younger but they were things he knew to be true

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and he wanted those who lived in the years to come to read them and remember them.

He began to write:

We have adapted, as the Old Ones in the beginning believed we would do. We move as easily in the 1.5 gravity of Ragnarok as our ancestors did in the gravity of Earth. The Hell Fever has become unknown to us and the prowlers and unicorns are beginning to fear us.

We have survived; the generations that the Gerns presumed would never be born. We must never forget the characteristics that insured that survival: courage to fight, and die if necessary, and an unswerving loyalty of every individual to the group.

Fifty years from now the Gerns will come. There will be no one to help. Those on Athena are slaves and it is probable that Earth has been enslaved by now.

We will stand or fall, alone. But if we of today could know that those who meet the Gerns will still have the courage and the loyalty to one another that made our survival possible, then we would know that the Gerns are already defeated. . . .

It was one hundred and seventy-five years from the sending of the first signal and there were two thousand and six hundred of them. . . .

Julia Humbolt sat high on the hillside above the town, the book open in her lap and her short spear close to her right hand. Far below her the massive stockade wall, built to keep out unicorns, was a square surrounding the thick-walled houses. Wide canopies of logs and brush spread over the roofs to keep out the summer heat as much as possible. They were nice houses, she thought, much nicer to live in than the cave where she had been born.

Her own baby would be born in one of them in only seven months. And if it was a boy, he might be leader when the Gerns came!

She already knew what they would name him: John, after John Prentiss, the first of the great and wise Old Ones . . .

A twig snapped to her left. She reached instinctively for her spear as she jerked her head toward the sound.

It was a unicorn, just within the trees thirty feet away.

It abandoned its stealth at her movement and burst out of the trees in a squealing, pounding lunge. She came to her feet in one quick movement, the book falling unnoticed to the ground, and appraised the situation to determine what she must do to stay alive.

In her swift, calm appraisal she found but one thing to do: stand her ground and make use of the fact that a human could jump to

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one side more quickly than a four-footed beast in headlong charge. It was coming with its head lowered to impale her, and for a fraction of a second, if she could jump aside quickly enough and at exactly the right moment, the vulnerable spot behind its jaw would be within reach of her spear.

She felt the sod firm under her moccasined feet as she shifted her weight a little, her eyes on the lowered head of the unicorn and the spear held ready. The ground trembled under the pounding of its hooves and the black horn was suddenly an arm's length from her stomach.

She jumped aside then, swinging as she jumped, and thrust the spear with all her strength into the unicorn's neck.

The thrust was hard and true and the spear went deep into the flesh. She released it and flung herself back to dodge the flying hooves. The force of the unicorn's lunge took it past her, then its legs collapsed under it and its massive body crashed to the ground. It kicked once and then lay still.

She went to it and retrieved the spear, feeling a stirring of pride as she walked past her bulky victim. Eighteen-year-old boys had been known to kill unicorns with spears but never, before, had an eighteen-year-old girl tried to do it. The son she carried would be proud of her when he—

She saw the book and gasped in horror, all else forgotten. The unicorn had struck it with one of its hooves and it lay knocked to one side, battered and torn.

She ran to it and picked it up, to smooth the torn leaves as best she could. It had been a very important book: one of the old books, printed on real paper, that told them things they would need to know when the Gerns came. Now, her carelessness had resulted in such damage to it that page after page was unreadable.

She would be punished for it, of course. She would have to go to the town hall and stand up where everybody could see her while the chief of the council told her how she had been trusted to take good care of the book and how she had betrayed their trust in her. It would all be true and she would not be able to look anyone in the eyes as she stood there.

She was a traitor; she was a—a *Bemmon!*

She started slowly back down the hill toward town, not seeing the unicorn as she walked past it, the bloody spear trailing disconsolately behind her and her head hanging in shame.

It was two hundred years from the sending of the first signal and there were five thousand of them.

. . .

John Humbolt stood on the wide stockade wall and looked to the southeast, to the distant val-

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ley where the Gern cruisers had set down so long ago.

It was a bleak and barren scene to him, despite all the years he had known it. Winter was coming again; the gray afternoon sky was spitting flakes of snow and an icy wind was moaning down from the north. Always, on Ragnarok, either winter was coming or the burned death of summer. They had adapted to their environment but Ragnarok was a prison that had no key; a harsh and barren prison in which all the distant years of the future held only the never changing monotony of mere existence.

But the imprisonment should end soon. Restlessness and impatience stirred in him at the thought. He was of the generation that the Old Ones had planned would meet and overpower the Gerns. He was twenty-five years old and he had studied since he was six for that meeting. He could draw diagrams of the interior of a Gern cruiser, placing the compartments and corridors exactly where the old drawings showed them to be. He and many of the others could speak Gern, though probably with an accent since they had had only the written lessons. And all of them had spent many hours practicing with wooden models of the Gern hand blasters.

They were as prepared as they could ever be and during the past year the anticipation of the coming of the Gerns had become a fever of desire among them all. It was hard to compel themselves to go patiently about their routine duties when any day or night the cruiser might come that would carry them to the stars; tall and black and incredibly deadly, and theirs if they could take it.

The Gerns would come, to look upon the men of Ragnarok with contempt. They would not fear the men of Ragnarok, thinking they were superior to them, and their belief in their superiority would bring their defeat—

A sound came above the moan of the wind, a roaring that raised in pitch and swelled in volume as it came nearer. He listened, watching the gray sky and his heart hammered with exultation. As he watched it broke through the clouds, riding its rockets of flame.

The cruiser had come!

It settled to the ground, so near the stockade that it loomed high and menacing above the town with its blaster turrets looking down into it. It was beautiful in its menace—it was like some great and savage prowler that might be tamed and used to kill the other prowlers.

He turned and dropped the ten feet to the ground inside the stockade, landing lightly. The warning signal was being sounded from the center of the town; a unicorn horn

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that gave out the call they had used in the practice alarms. But this time it was real, this time there might never be an All Clear sounded. Already the women and children would be hurrying along the tunnels that led to the safety of the woods beyond the town. The Gerns might use their turret blasters to destroy the town and all in it before the day was over. There was no way of knowing what might happen before it ended but whatever it was, it would be the action they had all been wanting.

He ran to where the others would be gathering, hearing the horn ring wild and savage and triumphant as it announced the end of two centuries of waiting.

"So we came two hundred light-years to find *this!*"

Commander Gantho indicated the viewscreen with a pudgy white hand—heavy in the gravity of Ragnarok—where the bearded savages could be seen among their pole and mud hovels.

Occasionally one of them would glance toward the cruiser with something like mild curiosity and Subcommander Narth frowned with a combination of perplexity and resentment. These descendants of the Rejects had obviously degenerated into utter primitives and primitives always reacted to the presence of a cruiser with a high degree of awe and fear. These merely ignored it.

"They behave like mindless animals," he said to the commander. "*They* couldn't have sent those signals."

"The transmitter was built two hundred years ago, before they degenerated," the commander said. "It must have been fitted with some means for automatic operation that required no further attention. Obviously, those specimens down there represent retrogression to the point where they have no knowledge whatever of the past."

"I suppose the medical students will want some of them for study since it had been assumed survival was impossible here," Narth remarked absently, his eyes on the viewscreen. "But the reason for sending the signals—I wonder what that could have been?"

The commander shrugged. "To ask us for assistance, no doubt." He glanced at the chronometer and his manner became brisk. "It's almost meal-time. Send out a detachment to bring some of them in for observation. They seem to be strong enough—if their intelligence isn't too abysmally low we can use them on Athena for simple manual labor."

"I'll go myself," Narth said. "I know a little Terran and it should be mildly entertaining to take a closer look at them."

"Take your detachment straight

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toward the stockade wall, not down it to the gate," the commander ordered. "I'll have one of the turret blasters destroy that section of the wall just before you get to it. The best way to get eager cooperation from primitives is to impress them with the futility of resistance."

The blaster beam lashed down from one of the cruiser's turrets and disintegrated three hundred feet of stockade wall into a billow of dust. Narth and his twelve men marched through the breach, their weapons in their hands. The thought occurred to him that they must appear to the natives as strange and terrible gods, striding through the dust created by their own genius for destruction.

But when he and his men emerged from the cloud of dust the natives were watching them with the same mild curiosity as before. He felt the gall of sharp irritation. He was a Gern and bearded savages did not ignore Gerns. As if to add to his irritation, several of the watching men turned away and went back into the houses, not as men who sought concealment but as men who saw nothing of sufficient interest to keep them outside in the cold wind any longer.

He scowled in frustration.

He ordered his men to a halt when they were some distance from the first house and they stood in a line, their weapons held on the four natives who stood under the canopy of the house before them. He beckoned to the natives, a gesture too imperative for them to fail to understand, and ordered commandingly in Terran:

"Come here!"

One of the natives yawned and went back in the house. The other three continued to watch with the same infuriating lack of interest.

"What's the matter?" The voice of the commander spoke from the communicator which hung from his neck.

"There are three natives by the house in front of me," Narth said. "You can't see them from the ship because of the canopy. I ordered them to come here but apparently they no longer understand Terran."

"Then give them some action they can understand—drag them out by the heels. I can't wait all day for you to bring back a few specimens."

"Very well," Narth said. "It won't take long."

He and his men approached the natives again, Narth marveling at the ease with which they moved in the dragging gravity. They were splendidly muscled, not bulkily but in the way a Gern *theno* cat was muscled. If only their intelligence was not too low, Ragnarok would become the source of an endless supply of the strongest, most docile slaves the Gern Em-

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pire had ever possessed. The discard of the Rejects two hundred years before had produced a wholly unexpected reward—

The thought vanished like a punctured bubble as his approach brought him near enough to see them at close range. He had expected their eyes to be like the eyes of some near-mindless beast, dull and vacant. Instead, they were sharp with intelligence and waiting purpose.

Warning touched him like a cold finger and he would have ordered his men to halt again but the brown-bearded native in the center spoke first, not in Terran but in Gern and to all of them:

"Look up on the roof—and keep walking!"

Narth looked, and saw that thirteen bowmen had suddenly appeared along the edge of the roof, invisible to the ship because of the canopy. Thirteen broad-headed arrows were aimed at their throats and thirteen coldly intent pairs of eyes were watching them for the first move to lift a weapon.

Trapped!

They had walked into the simplest kind of trap, set for them by dull-witted savages. In his surge of surprise and anger he did not wonder how they had learned to speak Gern. The important thing was that they had tricked him and his men into a position that was not at all in keeping with his dignity as a Gern officer.

They would not live long enough to regret it, of course. He opened his mouth, to speak the quick words into the communicator that would bring the blaster beam lashing down and transform the house and the natives into disassociated atoms—

"Don't!"

The warning came from the brown-bearded one again. "Your next action was obvious before you thought of it," he said. "An arrow will go through you at the first word. We have nothing whatever to lose by killing you."

Narth looked again at the arrow aimed at his throat. The flint head of it looked broad enough and sharp enough to decapitate him and the bowman seemed to be holding the taut bowstring in a dangerously careless manner.

His anger dwindled a little. It was true the natives had nothing to lose by killing him. He, on the other hand, had a lot to lose—his life. And their victory would be short-lived. It was inconceivable that such an absurd situation could last for long—

"A little faster," the native ordered. "Under the canopy here—move!"

They obediently quickened their pace and the bowmen on the roof dipped their arrows to follow their progress.

John Humbolt surveyed the line of Gerns, holding the Gern of-

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ficer's communicator in one hand, the microphone muffled.

The red-bearded giant, Charley Craig, shook his head as though in wonder. "It was as easy as trapping a herd of woods-goats," he said.

"Young ones," the blond-bearded Norman Lake amended. His pale gray eyes went down the line of Gerns and back again. "And almost as dangerous."

To Humbolt the appearance of the Gerns was entirely different from what he had expected. They moved heavily and awkwardly, their bellies and faces were soft, and the officer before him was trying to conceal a high degree of uncertainty with bluster.

"The longer you hold us the more painful and severe your punishment will be," he threatened. "Your trickery has gained you nothing."

"Trickery?" Humbolt asked. "All we did was go about our usual activities. Of course, when you destroyed a section of the wall that required months of hard labor to build and then invaded our town with drawn weapons we could only classify you as hostile intruders. As for punishment: your degree of punishment will depend upon how well you cooperate."

"*Our* punishment?" The Gern glared, his face purpling. "*Our* punishment? You ignorant fool—you insane, megalomaniac savage!"

Humbolt turned to Charley Craig. "Have we let him talk long enough for you to mimic his voice?" he asked.

"Long enough," Charley said.

"Mimic?" Question momentarily crossed the Gern's face, to be replaced by the rage. "I warn you for the last time: your death will be painful enough at best. Return that communicator at once!"

He reached for the communicator as he spoke. Humbolt flicked out his hand and there was the sharp snapping of finger bones. The Gern gasped, his face whitening, and the fury drained out of him as he held his broken hand.

Humbolt turned to Charley again and handed him the communicator. Charley slipped it around his neck and let his flaming beard conceal the microphone.

"Let's hope my accent won't be too conspicuous," he said as he pressed the call button.

The response came almost immediately from the ship:

"Narth—what are you doing? Where are the natives you were sent after?"

Charley's beard parted in a smile at the words and Humbolt felt a sense of relief. What might have been a serious obstacle did not exist. Apparently Gern communicators were designed for serviceability rather than faithful tonal reproduction: the voice that came from the communicator was very metallic.

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Charley answered in a voice that was almost a perfect imitation of that of the Gern officer:

"We have thirteen captives and we're taking them to the ship now."

"He's referring to you Gerns, of course," Humbolt said to the officer. "Now, each of you Gerns will walk hand in hand with one of us. This may give your commander the idea you're leading us to the ship, which is all right. It may give one of you Gerns the idea to try to reach for his blaster. Don't try it. Our reflexes are far faster than yours and you would never touch it. Make no attempt to signal the ship or warn the others in any way. You will all thirteen be killed with your own blasters the moment we're discovered."

He saw nothing on the faces of the Gerns that resembled defiance. He said crisply to his own men:

"Let's go."

They went as a group of thirteen pairs, the Gerns walking obediently a little in front of the humans and with the bone-crushing grip of the humans bringing winces of pain from them. The speaker in Charley's communicator made a surprised sound at their appearance and demanded:

"What's the meaning of this? Why are you leading the natives? And why don't you have your blasters in your hands?"

"Our captives are very docile," Charley said, "and we can get them into the ship more easily if we lead them. Only one of them can speak Terran at all and he is very stupid."

The Terran-speaking officer reddened at the reference to himself but made no other move to show his resentment.

The airlock slid open when they reached the bottom of the boarding ramp and six armed Gerns stepped out, shackles in their hands.

"Orders of the commander, sir," the officer in charge of them said to the Gern officer beside Humbolt, looking down at him. "The natives will be chained together before taking them to the examination chamber. They will—"

He saw, belatedly, the strained expressions on the faces of the Gerns below him. He snapped a command as he jerked at the blaster he carried:

"The natives—*kill them!*"

Humbolt shot him with the blaster of the officer beside him before he could fire. The other five went down a moment later, but not before one of them had killed Chiara.

The commander would have seen it all in his viewscreen. They had seconds left in which to carry out their plan.

"Into the ship!" he said. "Leave the Gerns."

They ran, the airlocks begin-

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ning to slide shut as they did so. They crowded through before the locks closed completely, leaving thirteen Gerns suddenly locked outside their own ship.

Alarm bells were ringing shrilly inside the ship and from the multiple-compartment shafts came the sounds of elevators dropping with reinforcements. They ran past the elevator shafts without pausing, to split forces as they had long ago planned; five men going with Charley to try to fight their way to the drive room and five going with Humbolt in the attempt to take the control room.

Humbolt found the manway ladder and they began to climb. There was one factor much in their favor; the Gerns would waste some time looking for them near the bottom of the elevator shafts.

They came to the control room level and ran down the short corridor. They turned left into the one that had the control room at its end and into the fire of six waiting Gerns.

For three seconds the corridor was an inferno of blaster beams that cracked and hissed as they met and crossed, throwing little chips of metal from the walls. When it was over one man remained standing beside Humbolt: the blonde and nerveless Lake.

Thomsen and Barber and Leandro were dead and Jimmy West was bracing himself against the wall, a blaster hole in his chest and his legs giving way under him. He tried to smile and tried to say something: "We showed—showed —" He slid to the floor, the sentence unfinished.

They ran on, leaping the bodies of the Gerns. The control room door swung open a crack as they neared it then was knocked wide open as Humbolt shot the Gern who had intended to take a cautious look outside.

They went through the door, to engage in the last brief battle. There were two officers in addition to the one who wore a commander's uniform and the three of them swung up their blasters in the way that seemed so curiously slow to the men of Ragnarok. They killed the two officers before either could fire and the commander's blaster was knocked across the room as Lake's hurled blaster smashed him across the knuckles.

Humbolt closed the door behind him and Lake recovered his blaster. The commander stared at them, astonishment and apprehension on his pale, fat face.

"What—how did you get past the guards?" he asked in heavily accented Terran, rubbing his bruised knuckles. Then he seemed to regain some of his courage and his tone became ominous with threat. "More guards will be here within a minute. Lay down your weapons and—"

"Don't talk until you're asked a question," Lake said.

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"Lay down your weapons and surrender to me and I'll let you go free—"

Lake slapped him across the mouth with a backhanded blow that snapped his head back on his shoulders and split his lip.

"I said, don't talk. And above all, never lie to us like that."

The commander spat out a tooth and held his hand to his bleeding mouth. He did not speak again.

Humbolt located the communicator that would connect him with Charley. There was a rustling sound coming from it as though Charley was breathing heavily.

"Charley?" he asked.

"Here," the voice of Charley answered. "We made it to the drive room—three of us. How about you?"

"Lake and I have the control room. Cut their drives, just in case something should go wrong up here. I'll let you know as soon as the ship is ours."

He turned to the commander. "First, I want to know how the war is going."

"I—" The commander looked uncertainly at Lake.

"Just tell the truth," Lake said. "Whether you think we'll like it or not."

"We have all the planets but Earth itself," the commander said. "We'll have that soon."

"And the Terrans on Athena?"

"They're still—working for us."

"Now," Humbolt said, "you will order your men to return to their sleeping quarters. All of them. They will leave their blasters in the corridors outside and they will not resist the men who will come to take charge of the ship."

The commander made a last effort toward defiance:

"And if I refuse?"

Lake answered, smiling at him with the smile of his that was no more than a quick showing of white teeth and with the savage eagerness in his pale eyes.

"If you refuse I'll start with your fingers and break every bone to your shoulders. If that isn't enough I'll start with your toes and go to your hips."

The commander hesitated, sweat filming his face as he looked at them. Then he reached out to switch on the all-stations communicator and say into it:

"Attention, all personnel: You will return to your quarters at once, leaving your weapons in the corridors outside. You are ordered to make no resistance when the natives come . . ."

There was a silence when the commander had finished and Humbolt and Lake looked at each other, bearded and clad in prowler skins but standing at last in the control room of the ship that was theirs; in a ship that could take them to Athena, to Earth, to the end of the galaxy.

The commander, watching

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them, could not conceal his last vindictive anticipation.

"You have the cruiser," he said, "but what can you do with it?"

"I'll tell you what we can do with it," Humbolt said kindly. "We've planned it for two hundred years. We have the cruiser and sixty days from now we'll have Athena. That will be only the beginning and you Gerns are going to help us do it."

It was not, Narth thought, the kind of homecoming he and the others had expected. Ragnarok lay a hundred and eighty-five light-years behind them and Athena was only three ship's days ahead of them. It had been only forty-nine days since he had gone out to bring back some of the natives for observation in the examination chamber and for appraisal of their worth as slaves. In those forty-nine days the men of Ragnarok had forced the Gerns to teach them how to operate the cruiser, learning with amazing speed.

"You have to learn fast on Ragnarok," the one called Charley had remarked. "Those who are slow in learning don't live long enough to produce any slow-learning children."

In retrospect it seemed to Narth that the first two days had been an insane nightmare of bearded monsters who asked endless questions about the ship and calmly, deliberately, broke the bones of anyone who refused to answer or gave an answer that was not true. By the end of the second day they had learned that passive resistance was painful and futile and two of them had learned that active resistance was fatal.

So they had ceased resisting in any manner, but it was only a temporary submission for strategic reasons. The savages had gained the upper hand by means of deceit and ruthlessness; they had been lucky in their trickery and had become masters of the cruiser but they were still savages from a mud and log village. They had dared to defy Gerns and when their luck ran out they would pay the penalty.

He clenched his hands at the thought. It was something to look forward to, the day when these savages would be taken back to Ragnarok and an example made of them in the center of the village while their wives and their children and all the savages left behind watched and learned what it meant to defy the Gerns. . . .

The red-bearded Charley was smiling at him from the co-pilot's chair.

"It's not much use to resent what happened," he said. "You Gerns made two big mistakes and this is the result."

Narth quickly forced his face into an expression of civil interest. "We made two big mistakes?" he asked.

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It was very seldom that he held a conversation with any of the Ragnarok men. Humbolt would occasionally exchange a few words not relevant to the savages' plans but only Charley ever exhibited any desire to engage in idle conversation with the Gerns. It seemed to amuse him to observe their reactions. Galling as it was, it was more comfortable than the cold menace that was so characteristic of the others. Especially the one called Lake. Lake had never threatened him in any way but there was an appalling aura of dangerousness about him that made threats unnecessary. It had been Lake who had avenged the death of the Ragnarok boy, that two Gerns stabbed to death with long knives stolen from the galley. Lake had cornered them and then, without touching his weapons, he had proceeded to disembowel them with their own knives. He had stood and smiled down at them as they writhed and moaned and finally died. . . .

"First, you Gerns underestimated us," Charley said. "You thought we were as primitive as we looked. Actually, we let our beards grow for the past year to help you think that. You were stupid enough to take it for granted we were stupid.

"Then you were afraid to do anything while there was yet time. You, yourself, were afraid to warn the ship. The commander was afraid to resist and hoped the men at the different stations would do something. The men at the different stations hoped that someone else would do something.

"Hope is a good thing but—" Charley smiled at him again—"you have to fight together and not be afraid of getting hurt."

Humbolt strode into the control room.

"We'll make the test now," he said to Charley.

He went to the board and seated himself, then punched the BATTLE STATIONS button. "You"—he looked at Narth—"strap yourself in for high-acceleration maneuvers."

Narth did so and asked, "High acceleration?"

"We want to make some tests with this cruiser so we'll know what we can do with the two we'll get at Athena. And there *are* two more cruisers at Athena—you didn't lie about it, did you?"

He asked the question in the tone that had so often presaged painful violence for Gerns who had lied and Narth hastily assured him:

"No—there are two cruisers there, as we told you. But what—when you get them—"

He stopped, wondering if he could tactfully ask Humbolt what he thought he could do with them.

"We'll take the three cruisers back to Ragnarok," Humbolt said. "We'll pick up the rest of the

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Ragnarok men who are neither too old nor too young and go on to Earth. I'll show you, in a minute, why we expect no trouble breaking through your lines around Earth. These Ragnarok men will be given training in the handling of both Gern and Terran ships and then we will destroy all the Gern ships around Earth that refuse to surrender."

Narth restrained a smile, some of his depression leaving him. It was a plan so fantastic it was amusing; it would be the last ambitious attempt the savages would ever make.

"As you know," Humbolt said, "the largest ship's blasters are good for only a relatively short range due to the dispersion. A space battle consists of firing your long-range projectiles and trying to dodge the projectiles of the enemy. The acceleration limitator makes certain that the projectile evader mechanism doesn't cause such a sudden change of direction or such a degree of acceleration that the crew will be injured or killed.

"We from Ragnarok are accustomed to a one point five gravity. We can withstand much higher degrees of acceleration than Gerns or men from Earth. Now, we're going to make some preliminary tests. We've had the acceleration limitator disconnected."

"Disconnected?" Narth heard the frantic note in his own cry. "Don't—you'll kill us all!"

"No," Humbolt said. "We won't go any farther right now than to make you unconscious."

"But it—"

Humbolt touched the acceleration control and Narth was shoved deep in the seat, his breath cut off as his diaphragm sagged. The cruiser swung in a curve and Narth was slammed sideways, the straps cutting into his flesh and his vision blurring. He thought Humbolt was watching him; he could not see to tell for sure.

"Now," he heard Humbolt say, his voice dim and distant, "We'll see how many G's you can take."

An instant later something smashed at him like a physical force and consciousness vanished.

"You didn't give us a chance to come anywhere near our own acceleration limit," Humbolt said to him after he had regained consciousness. "But you can see now that the Gern ships around Earth can never hope to out-maneuver us nor hope to hit us."

Narth saw, and what he saw was unpleasant to behold. The Ragnarok savages possessed a physical abnormality that would enable them to do as they planned. Earth and Athena would be lost and a corner of the Gern Empire thrust back.

But the Gerns were a race of conquerors who ruled across a thousand lightyears of space. The existence of the Empire was proof

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of their superiority. While the savages strutted on Earth and Athena, boasting of their prowess, the Empire would be laying plans and preparing for their annihilation.

When the time was right the Gerns would strike and when it was over the fate of Earth and Athena would be a grim example to all other subject worlds of the utter futility of defying Gern domination.

He looked at Humbolt, feeling the hatred and anticipation twist his face.

"We'll go on to engage the Gern home fleet without any waste of time," Humbolt said. "Then we'll destroy your Empire, world by world."

It seemed to Narth that the full and terrible implications were slow in coming to him.

"Destroy the Empire—*now?*"

"Were you foolish enough to think we would stop with the freeing of Earth and Athena? When a race has been condemned to die and manages, somehow, to survive, it learns a lesson well: it must never again let the other race be in a position to destroy it. So we're not going to give you time to do that. You yourselves sowed the seeds on Ragnarok two hundred and twenty years ago when you condemned us to die. Now, the time has come to reap the harvest.

"You understand, don't you?" Humbolt smiled at him in the mirthless way that Ragnarok men smiled at Gerns and his voice was almost gentle. "You are a menace which we must remove."

Narth did not answer. There was no answer he could make. He sat without moving, the triumphant anticipation draining away from him. He had not thought they would dare challenge the Gern Empire—not so soon, before it was prepared to defeat them . . .

You yourselves sowed the seeds.

They would remember an incident that had happened two centuries before and they would shatter the Empire into dust, coldly, ruthlessly, without mercy.

The time has come to reap the harvest.

Only an incident in the Empire's history, unimportant, almost unrecorded, and the harvest would be destruction by the descendants of the unwanted, terror and death at the hands of the children of the condemned.

You are a menace which we must remove.

He wet his lips, feeling the weakness of a cold and bitter sickness inside him.

"But it's too soon to die . . ."

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THE *LADY* WAS A TRAMP

by ROSE SHARON

Terry had a hungry heart and star-filled eyes,
and a yearning for space was in his blood.
What he got was a lousy tramp,
and he wasn't even sure she wanted him . . .

SHE HAD BEEN LOVELY ONCE, sleek-lined and proud, with shining flanks; and men had come to her with hungry hearts and star-filled eyes, and the high pulse of adventure in their blood.

Now she was old. Her hide was scarred with use, her luster dulled; though there was beauty in her still it was hidden deep. A man had to know where to look—and he had to *care*.

The young man left the conditioned coolness of the Administration Building and paused outside the door to orient. Then he strode briskly forward, ignoring the heat that wilted his uniform collar and damply curled the edges of the freshly stamped papers in his breast pocket. He passed the inner tier of docks, refusing to look to left or right at the twin proud heights of gleaming Navy vessels.

Beyond them, alone in the outmost ring, the *Lady Jane* sat on her base in the concrete hole, waiting. In the white-light glare of the shadowless Dome, each smallest pit and pockmark of twenty years' usage stood out in cruel relief against the weathered darkness of her hull. Potbellied, dumpy, unbeautiful, she squatted without impatience inside the steel framework of supports, while her tanks were flushed and her tubes reamed clean. When the dock gang was done, and the ravages of the last voyage repaired insofar as could be, she would set forth once more on her rounds of the ports in space. Meantime, she rested.

The young man paused. It was his first good look at the *Lady Jane*. He half-turned back; but it was too late now. Fury, or training, or despair, or some of all of them, moved him on.

"That's him all right," Anita smiled, and turned a knob on the *Lady Jane's* viewpoint screen; the figure leaped toward them with

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focussed clarity, and the IBMan insignia showed up on the jacket sleeve.

"Mad dogs and eye-bee-men," Chan quoted softly, and leaned forward to study the young man with mock amazement. On the tenth "day" of Lunar sunlight it was still possible to keep moderately cool inside an unsealed ship, and the central Administration Building was kept at a steady seventy, day or night. But out in the atmosphere dome, it was *hot.* Yet the young man walking briskly toward the ship wore formal greens, and his shirt was bound at his neck with a knotted tie. Chandra leaned back, picked up a tall cold glass and shook his head.

"Look at him, Chan! He's a *kid . . .*"

Chan shrugged. "You knew that before. You got the papers . . ."

Impatiently, she shook her head. "I know. But *look* at him . . ."

"I wasn't any older—" Chandra began.

"Yes you were! I don't know what your papers said, but—*look* at him. And you weren't an IBMan. And we were all younger then. And—darling, you were a *man!*"

He laughed and stood up, rumpling her hair as he passed. "Well, if that's all that's eating on you, babe—hell, four of us kept you happy half-way home." He ducked through the bunk-room door as she started to rise. "Don't shoot," he called back.

"It ain't so funny, honey." She stood watching the screen. "What's bothering me is, who's going to keep *him* happy?"

Terence Hugh Carnahan, Lieutenant, U.N.N. Reserves, was twenty-four years old and newly commissioned. He was stuffed to the gills with eight full years of Academy training, precision, and knowledge. The shiny new stripes on his sleeve and the dampening papers inside his breast pocket were the prizes he'd worked for and dreamed of as long as it mattered. The fruits were sour now, and the dream was curdled. A man might approach the *Lady* incited by lust to a venture of greed; but the sight of her was enough to wipe out the last visions of glory.

The Lieutenant moved on, more slowly. He stopped as a three-wheeled red-and-white-striped baggage truck swung out in a wide crazy curve from behind the Navy ship to the left and careened to a stop at the *Lady's* side.

A tall thin man in rumpled full-dress whites leaped out of the bucket, swinging a canvas suitcase in his hand. He climbed aboard the ship's waiting elevator and it started up.

Terry walked on and waited beside the truck for the cage to

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come down. When it did, he produced his ID card, got inside, and rode up in silence.

In the open lock, the man in the dirty whites was waiting for him. He held out his hand, and for the first time Terry saw the pilot's jets on his lapels; and the boards on his shoulders spelled Commander.

"You the new IBMan?" the pilot asked. "Where's your gear?"

"I sent it on this morning." They shook, and the pilot's slim fingers were unexpectedly cool and dry.

"Welcome to our happy home," he said. "Glad to have you aboard. And all that sort of thing. Manuel Ramon Decardez, at your service. They call me Deke."

"I'm Terry Carnahan."

"Come on in. I guess they're all waiting." Deke led the way through the open inner valve.

In the suit room, the pilot turned back. "Just take it easy, kid," he said. "It ain't like the Navy in here."

It wasn't.

The Lieutenant had been on merchant ships before. It was part of his training to know the layout and standard equipment of every jump-ship ever made. He had been on inspection tours; and a *Lady*-class ship was still in Academy use for cadet instruction trips. But that one was Navy-maintained and Navy-staffed.

This *Lady* had left the service thirteen years back. The crew quarters had been torn out to make an extra hold, and the rule book had gone by the wayside along with the hammocks.

"Up here," Deke said, and Terry followed him up the ladder to Officers' Country. Then he stood in the wardroom doorway and stared at the crazy carnival scene.

To start with, the overheads were off. The only light was diffused U-V out of the algy tanks that cut two-foot swaths along opposite bulkheads. In the yellow-green dimness, the scattered lounging chairs and coffee cups and a tray with a bottle and glasses on the table, gave a ridiculous cocktail-bar effect to the whole place. And the first thing he saw was a hippy blonde, in tight black slacks and a loosely tied white shirt, who detached herself from the arm of a chair—and from the encircling arm of what looked like a naked brown-skinned man inside the chair. She ran across the room to fling herself on Deke, who picked her up bodily, kissed her with gusto.

"Where did *you* sneak in from?" she demanded. "We were waiting for—"

"Whoa, babe," Deke started. "If you mean—" He started to turn, began to move forward, to let Terry in, but from a shadowy corner a wiry little man in coveralls, with grease-stains on his hands

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and his hair and his face, broke in.

"What the hell! These two give me a pile of pitch about haulin' myself up here to give the new kid a big hello, and all I find is *this* old s.o.b. instead!" *These two* appeared to be the blonde and the naked man. Deke was the s.o.b.

"You bitchin' again, Mike?" The voice was a bull-roar; it came from the only member of the *Lady's* crew Terry had met before. The Captain came down the ladder from Control, sneakers and rolled-cuff workpants first, and then the tremendous bulk of chest and arms, bristled with wiry curling red-gold hair. The room had looked crowded before. With Karl Hillstrom's two-hundred-twenty pounds added, it was jammed. "Relax," he said. "Have a drink and relax. Nita *said* she saw the kid comin' . . ."

Deke had given up trying to interrupt. He turned back to Terry and shrugged. "I *told* you—" he started, and just then the blonde saw him.

"Oh, my God!" she said, and broke into helpless laughter; so did Deke. She took a step forward toward Terry, trying to talk. He ignored it.

"Captain Hillstrom?" he said formally, as loud as possible. He felt like a school-kid in a lousy play, doing a bad job of acting the part of the butler at a masquerade.

The big man turned. "Oh, *there* you are!" He held out a burly hand. "You met Deke already? Anita, this is our new IBMan, Terry Carnahan. Anita Filmord, our Medic. And Mike Gorevitch, our Chief—" that was the grease-stained one—"and Chan—Chandra Lal, our Biotech."

Terry fished in his pocket for the orders the Captain had failed to request, and noted with relief meantime that the Biotech, Chan, now unfolding himself from his chair, wasn't entirely naked after all.

It wasn't till then that he fully realized the hippy blonde was nobody's visiting daughter or friend, but a member of the crew and an officer in the Naval Reserve.

The blonde officer put a drink in his hand, and his last clear thought that night was that Deke was quite right: it wasn't like the Navy. Not at all.

When they gave him his commission, at the Examiner's Board, they had also delivered elaborate and resounding exhortations about the Great Trust being placed this day in his hands: how the work of an IBMan on a merchant ship was both more difficult and more important by far than anything done by an officer of equivalent rank on a Navy ship.

He knew all that. The ranking IBMan officer, on *any* ship, was

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fully responsible for the operation and maintenance of all material connected in any way with either solar navigation or space-warp jumps. On a tramp, there was likely to be just one IBMan to do it all; Navy Transports carried a full complement of four officers and five enlisted men. Fresh Academy graduates came on board with j.g. status only, and worked in charge of an enlisted maintenance crew on the "jump-along"—that abstract mechanical brain whose function it was to set up the obscure mathematic-symbolic relationships which made it possible for matter to be transmitted through the "holes" in space-time, enabling a ship to travel an infinite distance in an infinitesimal time.

On a Navy transport, a full Lieutenant IBMan would be in charge of SolNav only, with two petty officers under him, both qualified to handle maintenance, and one at least with a Navy rating, capable of relieving him on duty at the control board during the five or twelve or twenty hours it might take to navigate a jump-ship in or out of the obstacle course of clutter and junk and planets and orbits of any given System.

Even the senior officer, on a Navy Transport, would never have to jump "blind," except in the rare and nearly unheard-of instance of an analog failure; only tramps and Navy Scouts ever jumped willingly on anything but a 'log-computed course. The stellar analog computers were the Navy's Topmost Secret; when you used one, nothing was required except to make sure the jump-along itself was in perfect condition, and then to pull the switch. The 'log did the rest.

Merchant ships carried 'logs for their chartered ports of call—the *Lady* had two—but the charter ports were the smallest part of a merchant trip. The number of destinations for which Navy analogs were available was hardly a hatfull out of the galaxies. Without a 'log to point the way for him, it was up to the IBMan to plot coordinates for where a hole *ought* to be. With luck and skill he could bring the ship out into normal space again somewhere within SolNav reach of the destination. With the tiniest error in computation, a ship might be lost forever in some distant universe with no stars to steer her home.

Terry Carnahan had been hoping desperately for a Navy transport job—but only because it was the route to the Scouts: the Navy's glory-boys, the two-bunk blind-jump ships that went out alone to map the edges of man's universe. It was the Scout job he'd worked for those long eight years—and dreamed about five years before, while he sweated for credits to get into Academy.

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He didn't argue with his tramp assignment; nobody argued with the Board. He knew that most of the men who drew Navy assignments would envy him; the money was in the Reserves. And most of the rest, the ones who drew Transport and liked it, were there because they *couldn't* jump blind, and they knew it.

He knew all that. But when his orders came, and they told him he drew a tramp because he was tenth in his class—that's what they said: tramp work was the toughest—he also knew how close he had come to the dream, because he also knew that the top five men had been sent to Scout training.

Eight years of the most he could give it just wasn't enough. The answer was *NO!* For good.

But you didn't throw out eight years of training for a good job either. Terry went for his psychs and medics, and met Captain (U.N.N. Reserve) Karl Hillstrom; he took his two weeks' leave and reported for duty.

That first night, he fell asleep with the bunk-room spinning around him, and an obvious simple solution to the whole mess spinning with it, just out of his reach, no matter how fast he turned. When he stopped whirling, the dreams began, the dreams about naked crewmen, one of whom might have been *him,* and a terrible wonderful blonde in a sea of stars, winkin' and blinkin' and nod in a herring tramp to the smiling moon-faced girl who asked him in . . .

In the morning, Captain Karl Hillstrom showed him around Control. It was ship-shape and shiny up here, and the IBMan plunged gratefully into routine, checking and testing his board, and running off sample comps. He allowed himself only the briefest inspection of the jump-along and the keyboard and calckers attached. His first job, would be solar navigation. Once they were clear of the System, there'd be three weeks on solar drive before they jumped—plenty of time to double-check the other equipment. Right now, the standard computers and solar 'log were what counted.

He worked steadily till he became aware of the Captain at his side.

"How does it look?"

"Fine so far, sir." Terry leaned back.

"Anything messed up there, you can blame it on me. I worked that board coming in."

Terry remembered now—they had lost their IBMan on Betelgeuse IV, last trip, and come back short-handed, and with half the trade load still in the holds. Since no one but an IBMan could jump blind, they'd had to come back to pick up a new man—Terry.

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"I haven't found anything wrong, sir," Terry said.

"You can drop the 'sir.' We go mostly by first names here." There was an edge of irritation in the Captain's voice. "It's chow time now. You want to knock off?"

Terry hesitated. This wasn't the Navy; it was a lousy tramp. If the pilot was drunk half the time, and the Chief had a dirty neck, and the Captain looked like a pirate or stevedore (the first of which he *was*, and the second *had* been), the IBMan was certainly free to work or eat when he chose.

"I'd just as lief stick with it for a while," Terry said cautiously.

"Sure. Suit yourself. Galley's open. Take what you want when you want it . . ."

He disappeared. For a blessed two hours, alone with machines he knew and trusted, Terry ran off the standard tests and comps, noting with trained precision each tiniest deviation from perfect performance. The computer had never been built that could navigate without error. Maybe only in the tenth decimal, but that was enough for disaster. You had to know your 'log and your board and machines, and make your adjustments as automatically as a man makes allowance for the sights on a rifle he's known and shot for years.

It took Terry four hours to learn this board, and he had started his first dry-run when the sandwich appeared on his armrest. A tall plastic glass with a straw in the top and a tempting froth came next.

"Well, thanks," he said, "but you didn't have to—"

"It's chocolate," she told him. "I ordered strawberry when your papers came in, but they haven't sent it yet."

"Chocolate is fine," he said weakly, and let himself look.

The loose-tied shirt and tight-fitting slacks of the evening had been replaced by standard-issue summer-weight fatigues. The blouse was zipped up, and she seemed to be wearing a bra underneath. Her shorts displayed no more than a reasonable length of shapely leg. She wore no makeup, and her face looked scrubbed and clean. You could hardly get mad at a woman for being good-looking. The sandwich looked toasted and crisp, and he found he was very hungry.

"Well, thanks," he said again, and took a bite, and picked up the pencil with his other hand.

"Karl had to go down to Ad," she said. He took his eyes off his paper, and figured that out. Administration office, she'd mean.

"They called him to bring down the Beetle 'log papers," she said. "He asked me to let you know—it'll be back in the morning."

He nodded, trying to match her

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casual air. The Betelgeuse analog was coming back from the shop tomorrow. And IBMan Carnahan would be due for his first installation—the first on his own command. . . .

". . . we could finish your med-check in time for dinner," she was talking still. "You want to knock off up here pretty soon?"

He nodded again, and glanced over his board. The run he'd started would take most of an hour. Then some time for adjustments. . . . "Sixteen hours all right?" he asked.

"Fine. Dinner's at nineteen."

He sat there and stared at his sandwich and thought it all over, including the staggering fact of the Commander's silver leaves on the woman's faded green shirt collar.

The milkshake turned out to be good; the sandwich delicious. The run on the board got fouled up, and after a half an hour of grief, he had to admit his mind wasn't on it. There was a Manual on the wardroom shelf below, that would tell him the things he wanted to know. He switched off the board, and went down.

Page 532, Section six, was explicit. The Medical Officer for a six-man crew had to have junior psych, as well as a senior pharmacist's or nurse's rating—*besides* being qualified sub for the Biotech. With Commander's rank, it meant she likely had more actual years of training than he did. And: "The Medical Officer shall be supplied with dossiers . . . psych ratings and personality profiles . . . responsible for well-being of personnel . . ."

It explained some things: the milk shake and strawberry order, for instance; and why she should bother with either one. It did nothing to change the first impression of last night; or to make him forget his dreams; or—certainly—to make him feel any more at ease with Commander Anita Filmord. There were some things a woman shouldn't know about a man . . . or at least *some* women. . . .

There was very little Anita Filmord didn't know about Terry Carnahan three hours later. For the first half-hour she took smears and samples and scrapings with deft impersonal proficiency. Each labeled slide or tube went into its own slot or niche or clamp; then she threw a switch, and sat down to confront him with a questionnaire. To the familiar humming background of the diagnostics, she asked him all the questions he had answered twice a year for the past eight years.

"They put me through all this when I got my orders," he said at the end. "How come . . ."

"We do it every time you come on board. I'll have to run samples on Karl this evening too." The machine had run itself down. She pulled out the tape, tossed it

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onto her desk for reading later. "*I* don't know what you've been doing the past two weeks," she pointed out, and he felt himself flush at the certainty of what she meant. "And we've got a good long time to be shut up on this ship together." She stood there looking at him. Her smile faded. "The prospect isn't too appealing, is it?"

"*You* are!" he might have said. This wasn't the Navy. The way she was dressed last night, the way she acted . . .

Last night—was it one of those dreams? He couldn't be sure, but the memory came clearly. . . . He had heard a door close, and the murmur of voices, one high and one low. Before he fell asleep again—or in his dream?—a tall figure had entered the bunkroom and flopped in the last empty sack.

Five men and one woman . . .

"*You're goddam right it's not!*" he wanted to say, but he shifted his gaze four inches, and the leaves on the collar of her short-sleeved shirt were still a Commander's.

He threw out all putative answers, and retreated to subordination.

"Yes, ma'am," he said blank-faced. "It surely is, ma'am." *Five men and one woman . . . and Deke had it all tied up! . . .*

"I'm glad to hear you say so, Lieutenant," she answered deadpan. "But if anything *should* turn up—any problems or questions or troubles of any kind—remember, that's why I'm here." Her smile was just a bit mechanical this time. *Good!*

"Just come if you need me," she said. "*Any* time . . ."

Five men and one woman . . . and *come*, she said, *any time* . . . maybe it wasn't just Deke. Maybe . . .

He went to the spray room and stripped and turned on the shower full blast to shut out Chandra Lal's cheerful talk. When he was finished, Chan was still in a cloud of steam, the effects of a day cleaning algy tanks now removed. While Terry rubbed himself harshly dry, Chan resumed conversation.

"How do you like the old bitch?" he asked idly.

"I'm not an expert," Carnahan said, and rubbed faster.

"Who is? I've been here six years now, and I still get surprises. She may not look like much, but she's a hell of a mess of boat for five men to run. . . ."

Five men and one woman . . . What the hell? Come off that track, boy. Chan was talking about the ship—not the Medic.

"You're right about that," Terry said, and escaped to his locker.

He wore his clean uniform like armor into the wardroom, accepted a cocktail, and sipped at it

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slowly. Deke, the pilot, and Captain Hillstrom were both drunk already, loudly replaying the ball game they'd just seen on the vid.

Hillstrom had shed his uniform as soon as he got back in the ship; he was bare-chested and rolled-cuffed again.

Deke at least dressed for dinner. So did Anita. Tonight, the tight-ass slacks were red, and she *did* wear a bra—also bright red—under her clear plastic shirt.

Mike wasn't dressed and he wasn't drunk. He came up just in time to sit down and eat with the rest, his face and coveralls both, if possible, one layer greasier than the day before. Chandra did not dress either: he emerged from the spray room, glowing, immaculate, in the virtually nonexistent trunks he'd worn the night before. Anita poured him a drink.

Obviously, *she* wouldn't care how—or if—Chan was dressed.

And if *she* didn't, who should?

Not Karl Hillstrom, that was clear; or perhaps he was too drunk to notice. . . .

Sleep didn't come easy that night. When all the crew's bunks but Deke's were filled, Terry gave up, and went out to the wardroom. He found Deke there, alone, watching a film. He tried to watch, too, but next to the screen, a red light on the Medic's door flashed, DON'T DISTURB! and his eyes kept seeing, instead of the picture, the curve of a thigh limned in the fiery red of her slacks, or perhaps of the bulb . . .

He got up and prowled the room.

DON'T DISTURB: ". . . *any* time . . ."

The door opened. Karl Hillstrom came out. It closed behind him, and the light flicked off. She was alone now. She could be disturbed.

"Hi . . . late-late show?" Karl poured himself a drink and held up the bottle. "How about you?"

"I had it," Deke said.

"Terry?"

"Thanks. I will . . . later." He poured his own, a big one, and took it back to his bunk.

. . . *any time* . . . Deke didn't have it tied up, not at all . . .

At two in the morning, he remembered vaguely some provision in the Manual for refusal to serve in ships with a crew of less than ten, on grounds of personality stress. That meant a psych Board of course—and it had to go through the Medic . . . well, she might have reasons to make it easy for him. This wasn't the Navy, but it was still under Navy charter. *Lousy tramp!* He grinned, and promised himself to look it up, and went to sleep.

At three, he woke briefly, remembering she had said the Captain would have to have a new

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set of samples run that evening for his med records. Well, that *could* explain the DON'T DISTURB . . . At eight, they woke him to tell him the Beetle 'log was coming on board.

Mike Gorevitch drifted up from his engines to lend a hand, and the hand was a steady one, Terry found. By noon they were finished with a job that would have taken Terry more than a day by himself. His first installation was finished. Over a shared plate of cold meat in the galley, the IBMan found himself inexplicably pleased at the Chief's terse invitation to have a look below.

"Nothin' you didn't see before better on a Navy boat," Mike said, "But some of the stuff is rigged up my own way. You ever get stuck with a duty shift down there, you'll want to know . . ."

Like every jump-ship, the *Lady* was Navy built, equipped, and staffed. Even Hillstrom, who had made his stake in the Solar Fleet, had to get his Reserve Commission before they'd sell him his ship and lease him a stellar analog to hook onto the jump-along.

By now he had traded in that first cheap Sirius 'log for a prized Aldebaran, and had acquired a Betelgeuse besides. It was on Betelgeuse IV that Bailey, the IBMan who'd been with the *Lady* for nine of her thirteen years tramping, had lost his nerve. It was something that happened. The best jump-man reached the point where he figured he'd had it—the one more blind trip wouldn't work. Bailey quit cold, and declined even passage back.

This trip, the *Lady* carried a consignment of precision instruments for the new colony on Aldebaran III. But nobody ever got rich on consignment freight. It paid for the trip; that was all. The profit-shares came out of the other hold: the seeds and whisky and iron pigs and glassware and quick-freeze livestock embryos; the anything-and-whatsit barter goods that *someone* at some unchartered planet off the Analog routes would pay for in some way. That was the lure that kept the crews on merchant ships: you never knew when you'd come back with the barter-hold full of uranium, or cast-gold native artifacts, or robin-egg diamonds.

And if you also never knew for sure *when* you'd come back, or *where from*, or *whether* . . . well, that was the reason why IBMen went upstairs fast. For a man who could handle the job, there was pay and promotion, and almost anything else he might want.

What Carnahan wanted, the *Lady* didn't have.

For Mike Gorevitch, that was not the case.

The *Lady* was a tramp. She was scratched and dented and

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tarnished with age. She'd lost her polish, and her shape was out of date. She'd been around, and it showed.

But she had beauty in her still, if you knew where to look, and you *cared*.

"There's a dance in the old girl yet," Mike said approvingly, when he saw the IBMan's hand linger with pleasure on the smooth perfect surface of the shaft he'd ground the night before. "You read *Archy?*" he asked.

Terry shook his head. "What's that?"

"You might not like it," Mike said doubtfully. He opened a locker and pulled out a battered grease-stained book. "Here. You can take it up with you if you want."

That night, Terry slept. He took the Manual and Mike's book both to the bunk with him right after dinner, and found what he wanted in one, then turned to the other. Both of them helped, and so did exhaustion.

But somewhere in the night he woke long enough to note that it was Deke who came in last again, and to identify the pattern of repeated sounds from two nights back. It had *not* been a dream.

Five men and one woman . . . He wondered *why* Bailey had quit. Nine years, and then . . . If you took it that long . . . Well, he had the same way out if he wanted it . . . *any time* . . .

Next day, again, he worked at his board through the morning. This time it was Chandra who happened to be in the galley when Terry went down for his lunch. The pattern began to come clear: informal, haphazard, and unsystematic, but they were taking him over the ship, little by little.

The two of them sat on a white-painted bench in the Bio lab, and discoursed of algae and alien life-forms and also Anita. "Listen," Chan said abruptly, "has the blonde bombshell got you mixed up?"

"No," Terry said bitterly. "I wouldn't say that."

"It ain't like the Navy, is it kid?" Chan smiled, and it didn't matter if you knew the man had been trained for years to create just this feeling of empathy and understanding; he created it all the same. If he couldn't, they'd be in a hell of a spot on an alien planet . . .

"Don't get me wrong," Terry said cautiously. "I like girls. If you think everyone sleeps in his own bed on a Navy ship . . ."

"I came out of Academy too," Chan reminded him.

"All right, then, you know what I mean. But this kind of deal—one dame, and the five of us, and — I just can't see it. If I go to a whore, I don't want her around me all day. And if I have a girl, I damn sure don't want every guy she sees to get into

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. . . you know what I mean!"

"Yeah." He was silent a moment. "I know what *you* mean, but I don't know if I can explain . . . Look, it's a small ship, and the payload counts. A girl friend for every guy would be nice, but . . . well, hell, kid, you'll see for yourself once we get going. All I wanted to say to begin with was, if you got the idea it was all for one guy, you were wrong. Deke's always kind of hopped up before we go, and he's the guy we have to count on to get us out safe. She just naturally . . . anyhow, don't let him monopolize anything—not if you *want* it, that is."

"I don't," Terry said, and they went back to algae and aliens. And at least one thing emerged: Mike wasn't the only man on board who *cared*. Just what it was that mattered so much to him or to Chan, Terry wasn't quite sure: their work, or the *Lady* herself, or the dead dream she stood for. Whatever exactly it was, the *feeling* was something that Terry could understand—and that Deke and Hillstrom never could . . .

Hillstrom didn't have to. He owned the *Lady*. He wasn't obliged to understand her: only to pay the bills, and let the hired hands do their work for him. *For her* . . . ?

The hired help worked, all right. At least, Mike and Chan did, and Terry Carnahan. Even Deke put in a full morning up in Control, checking his board, and testing a dry run with Terry.

Even Deke? What the hell? Deke had been holding down the driver's seat on the *Lady* for four years now. He *had* to be good. And he was; the half-hour's test was enough to show his class.

In his bunk that night, Terry improved his acquaintance with Archy the poet-cockroach, and Mehitabel the cat. Archy's opinions amused him; but in the determined dignity of the lady-cat's earthy enthusiasms, he found a philosophy sadly appropriate for the life of a *Lady* ship: and it was difficult to continue to feel entirely sad about the fit of the shoe while Mehitabel danced her wild free whirling dance, defiant and *tourjoursgai* . . . *wotthehell* . . . *wotthehell* . . .

Mehitabel, Mike, and Chandra all helped. But backing them all up was the Manual.

P. 549, at the bottom: "An IBMan specialist may exercise his privilege of declaring the psychological conditions on board a ship of the specified classes unfit for blind jump at any time before plotting navigation data to the jump-off point in question. In such cases, the ship will return by analog to Lunar Base; or if unequipped to do so, will remain in its current port, pending a hearing by the Commandant."

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They wouldn't jump till after the Aldebaran hop. Six weeks out, two weeks in port: there was time to wait and find out whether one lousy tramp could ruin the work and the dreams of thirteen years.

As he fell asleep, the IBMan thought with surprise that grease and nudity were perhaps as fitting uniforms in their ways for engine maintenance and bio work as knife-edge trouser creases were for precision computing. . . .

The thirty-foot-wide metal collar that encircled the lower third of the *Lady Jane,* in drydock, rose slowly out of the concrete pit. When the *Lady* had been lifted some twenty feet, the trucks moved in and extended supporting yard-wide jacks up into smaller collars, set in the underside of the wide, upper flange.

The outer lock, 'midships, swung open, and the elevator cage started down. Five figures in full-gear pressure suits emerged and took their places on the flange. They fastened the chains and winches securing the jacks in their sockets and belted themselves in position to keep a watch on the winches during the overland voyage.

One by one their voices cleared over the suit-to-suit. "All secure here . . . Okay . . . Check . . . Secure . . . That's it!" Hillstrom's was the last.

"All clear?" He waited five seconds, then waved the red flag at his side. The enormous pit jack sank downward; and the trucks started lifting alone. At fifty feet, the jet tubes were clear of the ramp. The trucks swivelled into alignment, and sixty-five earth-tons of wheelchair began to move the *Lady* away from drydock in lumbering state.

From his seat on the flange, Terence Hugh Carnahan surveyed man's moon, and found it good. Six hours away, the black knife-edge of lunar night sliced off the horizon. Ten minutes ahead, the mile-long launching tube yawned empty and waiting.

The suit-to-suit crackled with small talk and still-smaller humor. Terry almost gave in to the urge to turn it off. He'd been through the launching routine a hundred times, in mockups and dry runs, but this was his first time to ride a live ship over the face of the moon from the dock to the tube. If the schoolboy dreams of glory were dead forever . . . if the battered old hulk of the *Lady* was all he could have . . . even *she* had her dubious virtues, and among them the brightest was this . . . this moment, *now,* the fulfillment of, not a child's dream, but the Big Dream of a man, of mankind, for the stars.

It was sacrilege, nothing less, to be approaching the launch-site with a series of schoolboy *double*

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entendres supplying the background music.

He had actually reached for the switch, when a new voice floated in. "Still with us, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, *ma'am!*" He let his hand drop. The regulations made sense. Secured as they were in their seats, and spread round the bulge of the *Lady,* the audio was all the proof they had that each of them was still on post, alive and conscious. Even the Medic inside the sealed ship, watching the screens, couldn't be *sure* from what she could actually see, whether a man immobile inside a suit was effectively operative.

They came up to the tube, and the great cranes reached out steel fingers, stripping and lifting the *Lady* out of her wheelchair wrappings, pushing and nudging and sliding her into place on the runway. Six moon-suited figures slid down the jacks into the trucks, and were toted back up to the airlock by the tube elevator.

There was no time for small talk now. Five hours to see for the last time that the ship was secure; once the word, *ready,* went down, it was too late to look any more.

Terry covered his section with swift methodical care. Satisfied, he went to his chair, and strapped himself in; he did a last double check on his board; then he fastened his helmet back on, and began the slow conscious relaxing of muscles and breathing that ended the ritual.

When the count-down began, he was off in a floating dream of sunshine and sparkling water. *Zero minus nine,* and he sat up erect. *Minus eight,* and he forced himself back into limpness before they hit *seven.* Breathe in . . . out . . . hold . . . in . . . *six* . . . out . . . hold . . . in . . . hold . . . *five* . . . hold . . . out . . . *four* . . . in . . . *three* . . . . . out . . . *two* . . . innnnn*one*-annnnou—*out!*

Off and out . . . down and out . . . blackness and whirlpools and terror and *kick* back, up, *out!*

His finger punched the wake-up button before he was fully aware of consciousness again. The light ahead of him flashed green, and there was an instant's prideful notice that his was the second green on. Then he forgot to be proud, and forgot to be Terry Carnahan. Green lights flashed and steadied, then yellow and blue and red. The board was a Christmas-tree crossword constellation, each light a word or a number or place, their shifting patterns spelling out death and life.

Pressure eased; and the voices began—voices of engines and scanners and stresses and temps. Some he heard in the helmet and some the board told him with signals and lights. A voice in the

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helmet allowed him to take it off: the voice of the Bio board. A key on the pilot's board, at the chair up ahead, was depressed by a finger; the *think*-board, in this chair, flashed questioning lights. The *think*-board replied, and new figures lit up ahead, for the hands to use—the hands and direction and eyes of the *Lady,* up there at the pilot's board, steering *her* free of the multitude of menacing mites and pieces and bits of matter and mass in the populous planet-plied system.

The dance of escape begat rhythm to suit itself, and the old girl whirled on her axis, and pushed *her* way out to the stars, with a dance in her yet, wotthe-hell and the *think*-board was metal-and-plastic but flesh-and-blood too; part of *her,* of the streaming single mote which alone in this mote-filled single cell-of-Sol was bound to break out of bounds and escape to the endless entropic emtiness of Universe.

"Take a break, kid. We got a clear stretch here. Karl can take over."

He looked at the chrono, and didn't believe what he saw, and looked again. Five hours, and seventeen minutes past zero. Now aching muscles returned to sensation, and ego to Terry Carnahan.

Anita was standing beside him, one hand on a chair strap, the other held out to help.

"Whore!" he said. "Get away, bitch!"

She went away; Terry stayed where he was. What Deke could take, he could take too.

He took it for six hours more, through the last of the dust and debris of the System. He drank from the flask when it nuzzled his lips, and swallowed the pills she put in his mouth, and gave back what *she* needed: the readings and scannings and comps and corrections that went to the driver's seat, to the pilot's board, to Deke with the strength of ten and a tramp in his heart.

He stayed there and took it until there was no more to do. Then he reached for the straps, and her hands were already there, unfastening him.

Bitch! he thought. *Tramp! You* don't want *me!*

He let her lead him out of the room, down the ladder, through dim yellow-green, to the door where the light would be flashing red outside.

And there he stopped. There was something important to ask her, but when he found out what it was, he started to smile. *Which one do you want?*

Which *one?* How could she possibly tell?

As well ask, *Which one needs her?*

He laughed and stepped forward . . . and the tramp was his.

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FRIEND FOR LIFE

by GORDON R. DICKSON

Holter Lauren had roamed space for sixteen years, and he had a tough hide and a tough soul. On Dacla, though, he was scarred for life by the look on the face of a girl . . .

IT HAD BEEN SIXTEEN YEARS, and here Jimmy was dead. Holter Lauren sat with the body in his arms in the bare living room of the small, two-room house of the Daclan sea-farm. Outside, the cold waves of the globe-wide Daclan ocean beat like heavy, grey ghosts on the rocky slopes below the house. Jimmy's fishing boat, laden with its nets, rocked at the dock's end.

Jimmy would be over thirty, now, Holter thought. But under the stubble of blond beard, the dead face was still youthful . . . relaxed and innocent, gentle. Jimmy had not bled much—where the slim curve of the net-hook entered his body below the left shoulder blade, the heavy coat of coarse sisal fiber was marked by only a small stain of red.

It had happened with such impossible swiftness.

Jimmy, Holter had been going to say, *remember when they shipped us back from the Belt stars? Remember when we were orphans together, after an epidemic that killed off the grown people on Belt Four? How's it been with you since, Jimmy? What friends and neighbors you got, Jimmy boy? How's Dacla as a place to call home?* But he never had a chance to say any of it. Holter was rich now, a ship-hopper, a perambulating tourist who wandered where his whims took him. They had brought him to Dacla now, after sixteen years—hours too late.

He had come directly here from the ship. He had waited in this cold little room until Jimmy's fishing boat came into the dock. He'd heard Jimmy's uncertain footsteps up the rocky walk to the house, and seen the front door open.

"Hi, Jimmy," Holter had said, "long time no see, kid."

And Jimmy had looked at him and coughed a little blood. Then he fell forward into Holter's arms and died, with nine centimeters

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of steel and the plastic handle of a net-hook sticking out of his back.

Holter Lauren had never known anything could touch a man like this. Rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief, Holter had been all of those. But always on the bright, slick surface of life. Now he crouched like a dog above another, dead dog, with a dog's dumb, savage misery in his heart. Sixteen years he had followed the dark angel of his own dark spirit until it no longer had anything more to give him. So he had come back to what might have been his bright angel, one day too late.

There was a small sound beyond the front door. Sudden new purpose flamed up in Holter. He reached to the net-hook in Jimmy's back and with easy strength drew it gently out. Dark and slim and hard, he moved noiselessly to the wall alongside the door and flattened himself out. The stained net-hook twitched in his hand.

There was a shuffle on the doorstep, a hesitant sound. Then, slowly, the door began to open. There was a movement—

Holter leaped. A flurry of action, and he slammed a slight form against the inside wall; and held it there, the needle point of the net-hook centimeters from a throat. A rabbit face with thin strands of black straggling beard gabbled in terror at him.

"Who're you?" whispered Holter.

"Dummy . . . don't hurt Dummy . . . no, no, please don't hurt Dummy . . ."

Slowly, but keeping the net-hook close, Holter released his grip. The obvious half-wit sagged against the wall. His eyes went to the body of Jimmy, and he began to cry.

"Oh no . . . oh no . . . oh no . . . oh—"

Holter dropped the hook to lift both hands and fit them around the narrow neck. The idiot reiteration died and for a minute something like intelligence gleamed in the black, vacant eyes.

"Don't know you—" whispered Dummy through the strangling hands.

Holter forced himself to let go and step back.

"I'm Jimmy's friend," he said. "Do you know what happened? Tell me!"

"No. Dummy don't know. Jimmy say stay home. Dummy couldn't go today in boat. Jimmy come home with hook in back. Oh no . . . oh no—"

"Shut up!" said Holter. The singsong voice cut off as if a switch had been snapped. Holter lifted the body of Jimmy with smooth strength.

"Where you take my Jimmy?" whimpered the half-wit, scrambling after him.

"To the police," said Holter.

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The Daclan police lieutenant, an older man who wore his sisal-cloth uniform carelessly, but neatly, sat on the corner of his desk.

"What are you going to do first?" asked Holter.

"Don't worry," said the lieutenant. His grey eyes under faded brows considered Holter. "We'll check into it."

"Check into it?" Behind Holter, standing half-crouched in a corner, the half-wit, Dummy, stirred. "Damn it!" burst out Holter. "This is murder!"

The lieutenant drew a long breath.

"Look, Mr. Lauren," he said. "You're a tourist. No offense—but you don't know Daclan. We're a young world, geologically as well as colonially. Our land is rock and we make our living from the sea. We're over-worked and under-populated." He stood up from the desk. "I'll do what I can."

Holter stood up also. With the fury in him, he felt taller even than he was.

"What did you have against Jimmy?" he asked softly.

"Have against him?" echoed the inspector. "There wasn't anyone I liked better than Jimmy. Everybody liked him—loved him. You come here after all this time and ask me what I had against him. How good a friend were you, these last sixteen years?"

Holter turned on his heel and walked out, down concrete corridors and into the cloud-broken sunlight of the street. He stopped, undecided; and in that moment he heard the hesitant scurry of feet behind him. He turned and saw the half-wit.

"Come here," Holter said.

The little man sidled closer.

"All right," said Holter, impatiently, "I won't hurt you. Now listen. Who was Jimmy's closest friend?"

Dummy didn't understand, put his thumb in his mouth to bite it.

"How about girl friends? A girl—did Jimmy have a girl?"

Dummy's thin face lit up. "Mincy!" he cried; and clapped his hands. "Mincy!"

Dummy led him by narrow, pedestrian streets between the blocky concrete buildings of the business section down to the harbor, past countless wharves and many ships until they came at last to a cordage warehouse. In the interior, the dim outlines of men at work moved to and fro; on the dock itself, a young girl in rough work pants and shirt sat on a coil of rope cable, gazing toward the sea. As soon as he caught sight of her, Dummy gave a little whimper, ran ahead and knelt down beside her. He hid his face in her lap and she put one hand on his head and stroked it absently. She did not look away from the sea.

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Holter hesitated, then approached slowly. The hand which stroked Dummy's tangled black hair was brown and hard, with short, blunted nails; her hair was yellow and alive and her face beautiful with fine, strong bones. She had not been crying but her face was stony.

"I see you've heard," said Holter. . . . "I'm an old friend of his."

"They were all his friends," she said. After a moment she added, "Would you leave me alone, please. I'd like to be alone."

"I want to do something about it!" Holter broke out, angrily. "That lieutenant I talked to—he's worse than nothing. I want to find the man who did it."

"You can't do anything," she said, expressionlessly, "You're a tourist."

"What's that got to do with it?" he demanded. "He was the only—the best friend I ever had. I'm going to get the man that did it. You can give me a lead."

"Please," she said. "Go away."

"What's wrong with you?" he shouted at her. "You're as bad as the lieutenant. Weren't you his girl?"

"His girl?" she said. "I was his wife."

"His wife—" Holter stared at her and the mounds of sisal cable on the dock. "What are you doing here? The sea-farm—"

"That was his work. This was mine," her voice had the eternal greyness of the sea in it. "I have to get back to work soon. Will you go now?" She spoke with infinite weariness.

Holter stood like a wild animal, baffled by its chains, for a second. Then he turned away, his fists clenched.

Dummy clung to the woman's knees. She patted him gently.

"Go with him, Dummy," she said. Reluctantly, the little man got to his feet.

For the first few moments, Holter strode along automatically, without plan. Then he saw a knot of men ahead of him, congregated on a dock above one of the little fishingboats. When he reached the group, Holter saw that a stretcher was just being lifted by block and tackle from the low deck of the boat.

"Easy," said one of the men on the dock, catching at one end of the stretcher. "Easy, don't jolt him now."

They unhooked the stretcher and four men took the handles of it. Holter could see that it held a boy of about sixteen. He seemed to be unconscious; his eyes were closed and his face white. But his head turned from side to side as he was carried past and suddenly a low moan seemed to bubble from his lips. The whole right side of his body was stained with blood.

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"For God's sake!" said Holter. "Why don't they give him a shot of morphine?"

"What morphine?" said the man beside him and turned. He recognized Holter as a tourist and his lips spread in a humorless grin. "Sure, morphine," he said. "And some wire cable that wouldn't have parted and let the sheave block drop on him in the first place." He spat on the dock.

Holter held his anger capped within him by force of will.

"Say," he said. "Do you know Jimmy Molloy?"

The other looked up at him with new curiosity. "Sure. Sure, I know Jimmy. What about him?"

"He's dead," said Holter.

The wind-toughened face stretched with surprise. "Jimmy? No!" He stared at Holter.

"He came home with a net-hook in his back."

"Net-hook—" the other's eyes narrowed. "Today? That huncher Bollen, huh?"

"I don't know," said Holter, as calmly as he could. "Was it?"

They eyed each other for a waiting moment; and, slowly, a curtain seemed to draw across the eyes of the other man.

"I wouldn't know," he said, and turned away. Holter reached out and caught his arm and swung him back.

The man looked down at Holter's hand on his arm.

"That's no good," he said.

There was a shifting of feet on the planks around them; and Holter looked up to see himself surrounded by a ring of weather-scarred faces. They said nothing, only waited; and after a second he let go. He turned away and went across the dock to the landward stairs and climbed them to the street. He looked back. Dummy was following.

Holter felt weary with the weariness of a great, frustrated rage. Down the street was a bar. He went toward it, turned in, and seated himself on a stool at the narrow, empty counter. The bartender came gliding down behind the bar to him—gliding sideways.

Holter glanced over the bar, saw that the bartender was legless, and sitting on a sliding platform that ran on two rails.

"What for you?" asked the bartender.

"Anything," Holter said. "Booze—anything." He looked at Dummy. "And whatever he wants."

"Coffee!" crowed Dummy, excitedly. "Hot coffee!"

Holter sipped his drink and felt it bite and burn on his tongue.

"Pretty busy on the docks this time of year," he said.

The bartender flushed.

"Go to hell!" he said.

Holter stared at him. "What's the matter with *you?*" he said.

The bartender grunted. "For-

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get it," he said. "You're a tourist. You don't know any better. If I had two good legs I'd be out there—nobody loafs on this world unless they have to."

"All right." Holter swallowed his own gall. "I'm sorry. Maybe you'll tell me why."

The bartender reached for a barcloth.

"Know anything about economics?" he said. "This here's no industrial world. There's no surpluses. We live on a subsistence level, and that's all. We got to work that hard to stay alive, day by day."

"I still don't get it," said Holter, watching him. "Why do things the hard way? Why weave cloth out of vegetable fibers? Why rope cable? Why don't you set up a plastics plant and a steel industry?"

"Who's to do it?" the bartender swept the cloth in sharp circles. "Food's the main thing. Food comes from the sea. To put people on plastics and steel we'd have to take them off the boats. Take them off the fishing boats and there's not enough food coming in. Then we starve. You can bring in only a few emergency things by ship."

There was a moment's silence. Dummy sucked at his cup.

"All right," said Holter. "I said I was sorry."

The bartender made a half-ashamed gesture.

"Forget it. I sit here all alone all day and I get to feeling—ah, forget it."

"Sure," said Holter. He leaned a little forward over the bar. "Do you know a man named Bollen?" he asked.

The bartender's head came up.

"Bollen? You mean Tige Bollen? Yeah, I know him."

"Where would I find him?"

"Up on the sisal farms, this time of year," answered the bartender. "They're harvesting, now. He works on Farm One Eighty-nine."

"Know him very well?"

"I know him," he reached out with the barcloth. "He's a tough huncher, that motherson."

"That's what I hear," said Holter. "I heard he's liable to use a net-hook."

"He'll use a net-hook. He'll use anything," replied the bartender, dispassionately, as if considering the instincts of some remote animal. "He's got plenty of guts; but if he can't take you with fists and feet, he'll take you with anything that's handy."

"He took Jimmy Molloy," said Holter, harshly.

"Jimmy?"

"He's dead," said Holter. "With a net-hook in his back."

The barcloth was stopped now.

"I suppose," said Holter, "you don't give a damn, either."

"Want another drink?" asked the bartender.

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"What's wrong with you?" grated Holter. "All of you? You scared of something? Everybody claims they liked Jimmy, but nobody'll move a finger after this bastard that killed him."

"You better pay me for what you got," said the bartender. "That'll be twenty-two fifty."

"For that rot-gut you sold me?" Holter said. "Fleece the tourist, eh?"

"The rot-gut's fifty cents," said the bartender. "The twenty-two's for the coffee. I thought you knew what the price was here when Dummy ordered it."

Holter threw down a twenty-five-credit note and walked away.

Out on the street, he turned to Dummy, who shrank from him.

"It's all right," said Holter, sharply. "I'm not mad at you. Listen, do you know this Tige Bollen?"

Dummy nodded, huddling against the wall.

"Good," said Holter. "You come along. I want you to point him out to me."

They went back to the transportation center next to the spaceport.

"Sorry," the one man on duty told Holter. "All the rentals are out."

"How about those?" said Holter; and pointed to a row of the light craft parked under a weather overhang.

The thin face of the other smiled placatingly, but without regret. "Those there are private craft."

"I see," said Holter. He thought for a second. "Look—" he said, digging into a pocket and coming out with an envelope. "I have to get moving right away. Here, look at this."

He opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper which he unfolded and passed to the transportation agent. The man glanced at it.

"But this is just a passp—"

Holter hit him before he finished the sentence and caught the limp body in time to ease it to the ground.

"Come on!" he cried at Dummy, and ran for the nearest of the flyers.

"Which way?" demanded Holter when they were aloft. "Where's Farm One Eighty-nine?"

Dummy fearfully raised his head and pointed north. Holter swung the nose of the flyer in that direction, a tight smile on his face.

It took them about half an hour to reach the farms. Air markers had been set out plainly. Farm 189 was a sprawling patch of rosettes of thick, fleshy leaves spaced in staggered orderly rows. Along one side of the farm ran a deep river of clear water, flowing down to the sea. Near the buildings of the farm was a dock, and

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beside this Holter set the flyer down.

The farmyard was filled at the moment with great stacks of the broad leaves. Beyond, the greenish black of the artificial soil of the fields began; and from within the scraping house came the steady whirr and thump of machines pulling the pulp and waste material of the leaves from the fibers. No one was in sight. Motioning Dummy to silence, Holter stole up behind one of the leaf piles and peered through the open door into the dim interior of the scraping house. Here and there were shadowy bulking machines; and among them came and went the dim outline of a short, broad, busy figure.

Holter turned to Dummy. "That Bollen?" he whispered.

Dummy nodded, his eyes big.

"Stay here," Holter ordered Dummy. And he strolled openly forward.

Prepared as he was, the abrupt change from brightness to gloom was still so startling that Holter had to stop and blink for a moment. For a second he was blind; and then the first thing the expanding pupils of his eyes revealed was a short, broad face, not a yard from his own, that seemed to hang there, regarding him with light green eyes.

"What d'you want?" said the face.

"I'm off the space ship," said Holter. "I wanted to see how they made rope from plants." He added, "My name's Lauren. Holter Lauren."

Bollen's face did not change. The lips were full without being loose, the nose slightly pug with wide nostrils. A face that might look cheerful, or sullen, or indifferent as it did now—but hardly any way else. The face of a healthy human animal. The body was slightly round-shouldered and thick-waisted, broad-chested, short-armed. All this Holter saw in one automatic instant of appraisal.

"Look around if you want," said Bollen, in a voice that was hoarse and rough, as if dust had gotten into the vocal cords. "I got work to do."

He was turning away, when Holter spoke.

"Wait," he said. It seemed to Holter that there was something lacking, as if a high religious sacrifice had turned out to be a simple butcher's job.

"Do you know Jimmy Molloy?" he said.

Bollen's face did not change.

"Sure I know him," he answered.

"I used to know him—we were kids together—" Holter was talking without paying any attention to the sense of his words. "We were orphans together, from Belt Four. Everybody liked Jimmy. He was that kind of guy. I talked to

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his wife today. She was sitting on the dock there, looking at the sea—"

"Say—" said Bollen suddenly, harshly. "What're you talking about?"

Holter looked at the shorter man calculatingly. Bollen was a full head in height less than himself, but their weights must be close to equal. The sisal farmer was tough; and the bartender had said he could be a dirty fighter.

Well, thought Holter, so could he. He had not bummed around on a dozen different worlds without learning a few things. He saw that Bollen was watching him with the careful balance of a man expecting action. Maybe though, he might be led to think that Holter could be taken by surprise.

"Why—nothing—" he answered, with the little quaver of a man whose nerve might have failed him. "Ah—come to think of it, it's later than I thought, I—I guess I'll be going."

He turned away, started to walk off. And in spite of the fact that he was braced for it, still he almost did not hear the soft, rapid thump of boots running up behind him. There was only that small warning—and then the sudden shock, the short man's arms clamped around his body and the whole weight of the charging body against him. But Holter was ready, crouching, reaching back over his shoulder to seize and flip the short man pinwheeling through the air to the ground ahead.

Bollen landed hard; and instantly Holter was diving on top of him, digging his knee into the other's middle. His knee bounced off suprisingly hard stomach muscles. He rolled hastily clear.

Holter kicked out at the kneeling man's chin; but Bollen grunted and swayed his body sideways. He caught Holter's boot as it shot past, seized and twisted it, throwing him. Holter kicked the hands loose with his other foot and rolled over onto his back, getting his knees up just in time to ward off the short man's diving body. They scrambled apart and to their feet; and faced each other.

There was a wariness in them both now. Each had been surprised by the quality of the opposition. They had rolled out of the scraping house into the brilliant sunlight and they stood between the wall of the house and a long high pile of leaves. Slowly, step by step, Bollen began to back away along the wall.

Cautiously, looking for an opening, Holter followed. Slowly, like rhythmic ceremonial dancers in a pageant of ancient passions, they moved together back along the loose plank wall until Bollen reached its end. Holter crouched to spring, tensed for an attempt by the other man to

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break and run; but instead, Bollen's arm flashed out of sight behind the corner of the building, to reappear all in one sweep of motion, swinging the bright flat blade of a machete high through the air.

Only the fact that he was already tensed to leap saved Holter. Instinctively he drove forward, inside the swing of the weapon, catching Bollen's wrist in his left hand and bringing his right hand and arm around the other's body to reinforce his left as he strove to bend Bollen's machete wrist back.

Bollen was inconceivably strong. Even with the power of both Holter's arms against his single one, the farmer's wrist resisted stubbornly before it began slowly to yield. The long blade drooped like a brilliant flower for one long second before Bollen's fingers loosened and it fell.

Triumph boiling inside him, Holter twisted about to drive his right leg between Bollen's to trip him up and throw him down. And then, in the second before Holter could accomplish this, he felt a terrific explosion of pain as the sisal farmer drove his knee upward into Holter's groin. The sky above Holter seemed to blacken with his agony. He felt his grip loosen; he fell, rolling into a ball on the ground.

A shattering kick on his shoulder sent him tumbling. Instinctively, he continued to roll, over and over, in an attempt to get away; but the boots of Bollen found him, in great hammer blows that jarred his undefended body and shook his brain into dizziness. He had one wild melange of impressions—the choking dirt in his nostrils, the flashing picture of Bollen towering above him; and the racking kicks that drove through all his attempts to escape . . . And then, suddenly, they ceased.

Gasping, Holter managed to focus his swimming eyes. He saw Bollen walk away from him over to the fallen machete, pick it up, and turn back toward him. Holter strained to move, but his muscles responded with agonizing slowness.

From the corner of the pile of leaves there was a flicker of sudden motion, and a shrill wordless cry from Dummy. A pitifully ineffective rock bounced off Bollen's shoulder—but it was enough to stop him. He swung angrily, raised the machete threateningly at Dummy's retreating back.

Holter drove his battered body as he had never before in his life. He forced it to his feet and into a lunge for Bollen. Chest slammed against back, and Bollen was banged against the wall, dropping the machete, stunned by the impact. Holter jerked him around and clubbed his fist again and again against Bollen's jaw.

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Bollen sagged and they both fell, Bollen still struggling. Kneeling Holter twined the fingers of both hands in the dark, thick hair of the sisal farmer; and, raising the shorter man's head, drove it against the wall of the building. He lifted and slammed it down again, and Bollen stopped moving.

Panting, Holter forced himself to stop. Murder was in *him,* now —but he wanted to take Bollen alive. He breathed deeply for several seconds; then he stripped off the sisal farmer's belt and tied Bollen's wrists behind him. A shadow fell across him. Dummy had stolen back and stood hunched above them.

"Bad—bad . . ." said the half-wit, scolding at the unconscious Bollen like some small, nervous animal.

Holter laughed grimly.

Bollen came to on the flyer ride back to Dac City.

Holter flew directly to the city hall and landed on the grass before it. He hauled Bollen from the flyer and thrust him ahead of him, up the steps and in through the doorway of the city hall. Dummy trotted along behind.

They went down the long concrete corridors until they came to the office where Holter had talked to the lieutenant of police that morning. Holter opened the door and pushed Bollen inside.

The lieutenant was at his desk. There also, seated in a chair facing him, was the girl Mincy. Two uniformed policemen stood against a wall.

Holter gave Bollen a shove that sent him half-sprawling across the desk.

"Here's your murderer," he said. "The man that killed Jimmy. I brought him in for you. And don't tell me you can't convict him; because if I have to, I'll bring in the best talent in the galaxy to dig up evidence he did it."

"I know he did it," said the lieutenant. He walked around the desk, helped Bollen upright, and with a knife cut the belt binding his wrists.

"You knew!" said Holter. "You admit it!"

"I never denied it," said the lieutenant, wearily. "Jimmy thought Tige had been short-grading him on the fiber he consigned to Mincy's warehouse. Jimmy went out to talk to him about it. It must have come to a fight between them. . . . Am I right, Tige?"

"That huncher!" growled Bollen, rubbing his wrists.

"Shut up, Tige," said the lieutenant. "Jimmy was worth three of you. As for you—" he turned to Holter— "your landing privileges are canceled here. I'm sending you back to the spaceliner you came on, under guard."

"But what are you going to do

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about him?" Holter almost screamed the words. "He's guilty! You got to make him pay!"

"Got—" the lieutenant put both fists on the desk top and for a moment leaned on it like a very old, very tired man— "give me patience. Make Tige pay for it? Sure. And who takes over Farm One Eighty-nine? You fool, you tourist fool," he said to Holter, "what do you know about it?"

Holter stared at him.

"No," said the lieutenant, savagely, "you don't understand. You can't see that here there's no cash value on being a nice guy, on being kind, or gentle, or a good husband. All that counts here is how much work your two hands can do. Sure, we all loved Jimmy. He was a good man—but he's dead now. There're men and women and children on the farms and on the docks and in the quarries, and right here in the city, who'll be missing the catch that Jimmy would have brought in today. Who do you think fed them—who do you think feeds me, God help me? I've got a double hernia, and this is the best I can do."

"I—" began Holter.

"Shut up," said the lieutenant, softly. "Listen to me. We're on our own here. We're too far out and too isolated to be rescued if anything goes wrong. We're too many to feed if our food supply fails. We can't afford an abstract justice to pamper our moral values or our emotions. Tige killed Jimmy, and nobody likes him for it—but what's to be done? We've lost one worker. Would you take another one from us? God in heaven, there isn't a person in this room, except yourself, that doesn't work fourteen hours a day or better and consider himself lucky to have three meals and a bed to sleep in for it. What can we do to punish Tige that wouldn't punish ourselves at the same time? Rehabilitate him? We haven't got the time. Imprison him? We haven't got the jailer. Sentence him to a lifetime at hard labor? What do you think he's got now?"

Holter sagged. He made a little defeated gesture with one hand.

"I give up," he said, and he turned away. "Let me out of here. I'm going back to the ship."

He took one lagging step forward and made as if to push between the two uniformed policemen. Then, abruptly, he had spun like a cat, shoving one man away from him and clawing at the gun in the other's holster. He had the weapon half-dragged clear before hard arms clamped about him, wrestled him down. He hung pinioned between the two men. The lieutenant walked slowly around the desk to face him.

"You would, would you?" said the lieutenant with a strange quietness. "You'd be your own judge

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and executioner. You'd risk being deported in irons, knowing that's the worst I could do to you. I suppose you think you've got guts."

He turned about and walked back to the desk. From a drawer he pulled out a sheet of printed paper and scratched briefly on it with a pen. He came back with it to Holter.

"Let him go, boys," he said. "Here." He drew his own sidearm and extended it, butt foremost, together with the paper. "Citizenship application. Sign it—and you can have *my* gun."

The hands on Holter's arms fell away. A sudden silence filled the office.

"Here, take them," said the lieutenant. "One for one's not a bad trade; and we badly need someone to replace Jimmy. Sign—and you can have his boat and his house. You can probably have Mincy, too. She's going to have to marry again, and she feels about Tige the way you do. She's young and healthy and that's a good sea-farm. You could do worse on this planet."

Holter did not answer. They were all looking at him; Mincy, the lieutenant, Dummy, and Bollen. Bollen did not avoid his gaze—he stared back at Holter without emotion, without fear.

"Or is that too much to ask?" demanded the lieutenant, softly. "Is that too high a price for you to pay for your revenge—to freeze at the nets and sweat in the sisal fields? Because that's the price, Lauren. Take over the work that Jimmy did and you can have everything he had, and more—you can have justice as well."

Holter still did not move, or speak. He stood before them now with all the brittle casing of his dark soul broken and stripped away. High on the wall of the office a clock ticked once, marking a minute gone—a long, long minute dwindling off into eternity, an eternity as grey as the sea, cold as an empty house, agonizing as an injured child, bitter as a legless man. After a while, the lieutenant lowered gun and paper.

"Take him away," he ordered the two policemen. "Take him back to his spaceliner."

The hands of the police closed on Holter's arms. Bollen's face still showed no emotion. Dummy gazed with wondering animal eyes, and the expression of the lieutenant was now indifferent. It was the eyes of the girl Mincy, as the policemen led him out the door, that made a mark deep on Holter's naked soul.

The look on *her* face he would never forget. . . .

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THE QUEER ONES

by LEIGH BRACKETT

Hank ran the town paper, and the hospital called him in to see the X-rays. They were of a hill girl's illegitimate boy, and they showed insides no man child ever had. . . That was the beginning—the end came on cloud-wrapped Buckhorn mountain, with deadly green lightning flickering, and a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder . . .

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I RAN DOWN BUCKHORN MOUNTAIN in the cloud and rain, carrying the boy in my arms. The green lightning flashed among the trees. Buckhorn is no stranger to lightning, but this was different. It did not come from the clouds, and there was no thunder with it. It ran low, searching the thickets, the brush-choked gullies, the wet hollows full of brambles and poison ivy. Thick green hungry snakes looking for something. Looking for me.

Looking for the boy who had started it all.

He peered up at me, clinging like a lemur to my coat as I went headlong down the slope. His eyes were copper-colored. They had seen a lot for all the two-and-a-half years they had been open on this world. They were frightened now, not just vaguely as you might expect from a child his age, but intelligently. And in his curiously sweet shrill voice he asked:

"Why mus' they kill us?"

"Never mind," I said, and ran and ran, and the green lightning hunted us down the mountainside.

It was Doc Callendar, the County Health Officer, who got me in on the whole thing. I am Hank Temple, owner, editor, feature writer, legman, and general roustabout of the *Newhale News*,

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serving Newhale and the rural and mountain areas around it. Doc Callendar, Sheriff Ed Betts and I are old friends, and we work together, helping out where we can. So one hot morning in July my phone rang and it was Doc, sounding kind of dazed.

"Hank?" he said. "I'm at the hospital. Would you want to take a run up here for a minute?"

"Who's hurt?"

"Nobody. Just thought something might interest you."

Doc was being cagey because anything you say over the phone in Newhale is public property. But even so the tone of his voice put prickles between my shoulder-blades. It didn't sound like Doc at all.

"Sure," I said. "Right away."

Newhale is the county seat, a small town, and a high town. It lies in an upland hollow of the Appalachians, a little clutter of old red brick buildings with porches on thin wooden pillars, and frame houses ranging from new white to weathered silver-gray, centered around the dumpy courthouse. A very noisy stream bisects the town. The tannery and the feed-mill are its chief industries, with some mining nearby. The high-line comes down a neat cut on Tunkhannock Ridge to the east and goes away up a neat cut on Goat Hill to the west. Over all towers the rough impressive hump of Buckhorn Mountain, green on the ridges, shadowed blue in the folds, wrapped more often than not in a mist of cloud.

There is not much money nor any great fame to be made in Newhale, but there are other reasons for living here. The girl I wanted to marry couldn't quite see them, and it's hard to explain to a woman why you would rather have six pages of small-town newspaper that belong to you than the whole of the *New York Times* if you only work for it. I gave up trying, and she went off to marry a gray flannel suit, and every time I unlimber my fishing-rod or my deer rifle I'm happy for her.

The hospital is larger than you might expect, since it serves a big part of the county. Sitting on a spur of Goat Hill well away from the tannery, it's an old building with a couple of new wings tacked on. I found Doc Callendar in his office, with Bossert. Bossert is the resident doctor, a young guy who knows more, in the old phrase, than a jackass could haul downhill. This morning he looked as though he wasn't sure of his own name.

"Yesterday," Doc said, "one of the Tate girls brought her kid in, a little boy. I wasn't here, I was out testing those wells up by Pinecrest. But I've seen him before. He's a stand-out, a real handsome youngster."

"Precocious," said Jim Bossert nervously. "Very precocious for his

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age. Physically, too. Coordination and musculature well developed. And his coloring—"

"What about it?" I asked.

"Odd. I don't know. I noticed it, and then forgot it. The kid looked as though he'd been through a meat-grinder. His mother said the other kids had ganged up and beaten him, and he hadn't been right for several days, so she reckoned she'd better bring him in. She's not much more than nineteen herself. I took some X-rays—"

Bossert picked up a couple of pictures from the desk and shoved them at me. His hands shook, making the stiff films rattle together.

"I didn't want to trust myself on these. I waited until Callendar could check them, too."

I held the pictures up and looked at them. They showed a small, frail bony structure and the usual shadowy outline of internal organs. It wasn't until I had looked at them for several minutes that I began to realize there was something peculiar about them. There seemed to be too few ribs, the articulation of the joints looked queer even to my layman's eyes, and the organs themselves were a hopeless jumble.

"Some of the innards," said Doc, "we can't figure out at all. There are organs we've never seen nor heard of before."

"Yet the child seems normal and perfectly healthy," said Bossert. "Remarkably so. From the beating he'd taken he should have had serious injuries. He was just sore. His body must be as flexible and tough as spring steel."

I put the X-rays back on the desk. "Isn't there quite a large literature on medical anomalies?"

"Oh, yes," said Doc. "Double hearts, upside-down stomachs, extra arms, legs, heads—almost any distortion or variation you can think of. But not like this." He leaned over and tapped his finger emphatically on the films. "This isn't a distortion of anything. This is *different*. And that's not all."

He pushed a microscope slide toward me.

"That's the capper, Hank. Blood sample. Jim tried to type it. I tried to type it. We couldn't. There isn't any such type."

I stared at them. Their faces were flushed, their eyes were bright, they quivered with excitement, and suddenly it got to me too.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"We've got something here," said Doc Callendar. "Something—" He shook his head. I could see the dreams in it. I could see Callendar standing ten feet tall on a pedestal of medical journals. I could see him on podiums addressing audiences of breathless men, and the same dreams were in Bossert's eyes.

I had my own. The *Newhale*

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News suddenly a famous name on the wire-services, and one Henry Temple bowing with modest dignity as he accepted the Pulitzer Prize for journalism.

"Big," said Bossert softly. "The boy is more than a freak. He's something new. A mutation. Almost a new species. The blood-type alone—"

Something occurred to me and I cut him short. "Listen," I said. "Listen, are you sure you didn't make a mistake or something? How could the boy's blood be so different from his mother's?" I hunted for the word. "Incompatibility. He'd never have been born."

"Nevertheless," said Doc Callendar mildly, "he was born. And nevertheless, there is no such blood-type. We've run tests backward and forward, together and independently. Kindly allow us to know what we're talking about, Hank. The boy's blood obviously must have been compatible with his mother's. Possibly it's a more advanced Type O, universally compatible. This is only one of the many things we have to study and evaluate."

He picked up the X-ray films again and looked at them, with an expression of holy ecstasy in his eyes.

I lighted another cigarette. My hands were shaking now, like theirs. I leaned forward.

"Okay," I said. "What's the first thing we do?"

Doc's station wagon, with COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE painted on its side, slewed and snorted around the turns of the steep dirt road. Jim Bossert had had to stay at the hospital, but I was sitting beside Doc, hunched forward in a sweat of impatience. The road ran up around the shoulder of Tunkhannock Ridge. We had thick dark woods on our right going up, and thick dark woods on our left going down. Buckhorn hung in the north like a curtain across the sky.

"We'll have to be careful," Doc was saying. "I know these people pretty well. If they get the idea we're trying to pull something, we'll never get another look at the kid."

"You handle it," I said. "And by the way, nobody's mentioned the boy's father. Doesn't he have one?"

"Do you know the Tate girls?"

"No. I've been through Possum Creek all right, but through it is all."

"You must have gone fast," said Doc, grinning. "The answer is physiologically yes, legally are you kidding?" He shifted into second, taking it easy over a place where the road was washed and gullied. "They're not a bad bunch of girls at that, though," he added reflectively. "I kind of like them. Couple of them are downright married."

We bucketed on through the hot green shadows, the great cen-

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ters of civilization like Newhale forgotten in the distance behind us, and finally in a remote pocket just under Tunkhannock's crest we came upon a few lean spry cattle, and then the settlement of Possum Creek.

There were four ancient houses straggled out along the side of the stream. One of them said GENERAL STORE and had a gas pump in front of it. Two old men sat on the step.

Doc kept on going. "The Tates," he said, straight-faced, "live out a little from the center of town."

Two more turns of the road, which was now only a double-rutted track, brought us to a rural mailbox which said TATE. The house behind it was pretty well run down, but there was glass in most of the windows and only half the bricks were gone from the chimney. The clapboards were sort of a rusty brown, patched up with odds and ends of tarpaper. A woman was washing clothes in an old galvanized tub set on a stand in the side yard. There was a television aerial tied on cock-eyed to the gable of the house. There was a sow with a litter in a pen right handy to the door, and a little way at the back was a barn with the ridge-pole swayed like an old horse. A tarpaper shack and a battered house-trailer were visible among the trees—probably the homes of the married daughters. An ancient man sat in an ancient rocking-chair on the porch and peered at us, and an ancient dog beside him rose up heavily and barked.

I've known quite a lot of families like the Tates. They scratch out enough corn for their pigs and their still-houses, and enough garden for themselves. The young men make most of their money as guides during hunting season, and the old men make theirs selling moonshine. They have electricity now, and they can afford radios and even television sets. City folks call them lazy and shiftless. Actually, they find the simple life so pleasant that they hate to let hard work spoil their enjoyment of it.

Doc drove his station wagon into the yard and stopped. Instantly there was an explosion of dogs and children and people.

"There he is," Doc said to me, under cover of the whooping and woofing and the banging of screen doors. "The skinny little chap with the red hair. There, just coming down the steps."

I looked over and saw the boy.

He was an odd one, all right. The rest of the Tate tribe all had straight hair ranging from light brown to honey-blond. His was close and curly to his head and I saw what Jim Bossert had meant about his coloring. The red had undertones of something else in it. One would almost, in that glare of sunlight, have said silver. The Tates had blue eyes. His were

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copper-colored. The Tates were fair and sunburned, and so was he, but there was a different quality of fairness to his skin, a different shading to the tan.

He was a little boy. The Tate children were rangy and big boned. He moved among them lightly, a gazelle among young goats, with a totally unchildlike grace and sureness. His head was narrow, with a very high arch to the skull. His eyes were grave, precociously wise. Only in the mouth was there genuine childishness, soft and shy.

We got out of the car. The kids—a dozen of them, give or take a couple—all stopped as though on a signal and began to study their bare feet. The woman came from the washtub, wiping her hands on her skirt. Several others came out of the house.

The little boy remained at the foot of the steps. His hand was now in the hand of a buxom girl. Judging by Bossert's description, this would be his mother. Not much over nineteen, handsome, big-breasted, full-hipped. She was dressed in tight jeans and a boy's shirt, her bare feet stuck into sandals, and a hank of yellow hair hung down her back.

Doc spoke to them all, introducing me as a friend from town. They were courteous, but reserved. "I want to talk to Sally," he said, and we moved closer to the steps. I tried not to look at the boy lest the glitter in my eye give me away. Doc was being so casual and hearty it hurt. I could feel a curious little prickle run over my skin as I got close to the child. It was partly excitement, partly the feeling that here was a being different from myself, another species. There was a dark bruise on the child's forehead, and I remembered that the others had beaten him. Was this *otherness* at the bottom of their resentment? Did they sense it without the need for blood samples and X-rays?

Mutant. A strange word. A stranger thing to come upon here in these friendly familiar hills. The child stared at me, and the July sun turned cold on my back.

Doc spoke to Sally, and she smiled. She had an honest, friendly smile. Her mouth was wide and full, frankly sensuous but without coquetry. She had big blue eyes, and her sunburned cheeks were flushed with health, and she looked as uncomplicated and warmly attractive as a summer meadow. I wondered what strange freak of genetics had made her the fountainhead of a totally new race.

Doc said, "Is this the little boy you brought in to the hospital?"

"Yes," she said. "But he's better now."

Doc bent over and spoke to the boy. "Well," he said. "And what's your name, young man?"

"Name's Billy," he answered, in

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a grave sweet treble that had a sound in it of bells being rung far off. "Billy Tate."

The woman who had come from the washtub said with unconcealed dislike, "He ain't no Tate, whatever he might be."

She had been introduced as Mrs. Tate, and was obviously the mother and grandmother of this numerous brood. She had lost most of her teeth and her gray-blonde hair stood out around her head in an untidy brush. Doc ignored her.

"How do you do, Billy Tate," he said. "And where did you get that pretty red hair?"

"From his daddy," said Mrs. Tate sharply. "Same place he got his sneaky-footed ways and them yellow eyes like a bad hound. I tell you, Doctor, if you see a man looks just like that child, you tell him to come back and get what belongs to him!"

A corny but perfectly fitting counterpoint to her words, thunder crashed on Buckhorn's cloudy crest, like the ominous laughter of a god.

Sally reached down suddenly and caught up the boy into her arms. . . .

The thunder quivered and died on the hot air. I stared at Doc and he stared at me, and Sally Tate screamed at her mother.

"You keep your dirty mouth off my baby!"

"That ain't no way to talk to Maw," said one of the older girls. "And anyway, she's right."

"Oh," said Sally. "You think so, do you?" She turned to Doc, her cheeks all white now and her eyes blazing. "They set their young ones on my baby, Doctor, and you know why? They're jealous. They're just sick to their stomachs with it, because they all got big hunkety kids that can't do nothin' but eat, and big hunkety men that treat them like they was no better'n brood sows."

She had reached her peak of fury so quickly that it was obvious this row had been going on for a long while, probably ever since the child was born.

Possibly even before, judging by what she said then.

"Jealous," she said to her sisters, showing her teeth. "Every last one of you was dancing up and down to catch his eye, but it was me he took to the hayloft. *Me.* And if he ever comes back he can have me again, for as often and as long as he wants me. And I won't hear no ill of him nor the baby!"

I heard all this. I understood it. But not with all, or even most of my mind. That was busy with another thing, a thing it didn't want to grapple with at all and kept shying away from, only to be driven back shivering.

Doc put it into words.

"You mean," he said, to no one in particular, "the boy looks just like his father?"

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"Spit an' image," said Sally fondly, kissing the red curls that had that queer glint of silver in them. "Sure would like to see that man again, I don't care what they say. Doctor, I tell you, he was beautiful."

"Handsome is as handsome does," said Mrs. Tate. "He was no good, and I knew it the minute I saw—"

"Why, Maw," said Mr. Tate, "he had you eating out of his hand, with them nicey ways of his." He turned to Doc Callendar, laughing. "She'd a' gone off to the hayloft with him herself if he'd asked her, and that's a fact. Ain't it, Harry?"

Harry said it was, and they all laughed.

Mrs. Tate said furiously, "It'd become you men better to do something about getting some support for that brat from its father, instead of making fool jokes in front of strangers."

"Seems like, when you bring it up," said Mr. Tate, "it would become us all not to wash our dirty linen for people who aren't rightly concerned." He said courteously to Doc, "Reckon you had a reason for coming here. Is there something I can do?"

"Well—", said Doc uncertainly, and looked at the boy. "Just like his father, you say."

And if that is so, I thought, *how can he be a mutant? A mutant is something new, something different, alien from the parent stem. If he is the spit an' image outside, then build and coloring bred true. And if build and coloring bred true, probably blood-type and internal organs—*

Thunder boomed again on Buckhorn Mountain. And I thought, *Well, and so his father is a mutant, too.*

But Doc said, "Who was this man, Sally? I know just about everybody in these hills, but I never saw anyone to answer that description."

"His name was Bill," she said, "just like the boy's. His other name was Jones. Or he said it was."

"He lied," said Mrs. Tate. "Wasn't Jones no more than mine is. We found that out."

"How did he happen to come here?" asked Doc. "Where did he say he was from?"

"He come here," Mrs. Tate said, "driving a truck for some appliance store, Grover's I think it was, in Newhale. Said the place was just new and was making a survey of teevees around here, and offering free service on them up to five dollars, just for goodwill. So I let him look at ours, and he fussed with it for almost an hour, and didn't charge me a cent. Worked real good afterward, too. That would 'a been the end of it, I guess, only Sally was under his feet all the time and he took a shine to her. Kept coming back,

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and coming back, and you see what happened."

I said, "There isn't any Grover's store in Newhale. There never has been."

"We found that out," said Mrs. Tate. "When we knew the baby was coming we tried to find Mr. Jones, but it seems he'd told us a big pack of lies."

"He told me," Sally said dreamily, "where he come from."

Doc said eagerly, "Where?"

Twisting her mouth to shape the unfamiliar sounds, Sally said, "Hrylliannu."

Doc's eyes opened wide. "Where the hell is that?"

"Ain't no place," said Mrs. Tate. "Even the schoolteacher couldn't find it in the atlas. It's only another of his lies."

But Sally murmured again, "Hrylliannu. Way he said it, it sounded like the most beautiful place in the world."

The stormcloud over Buckhorn was spreading out. Its edges dimmed the sun. Lightning flicked and flared and the thunder rolled. I said, "Could I take a look at your television?"

"Why," said Mrs. Tate, "I guess so. But don't you disturb it, now. Whatever else he done, he fixed that teevee good."

"I won't disturb it," I said. I went up the sagging steps past the old man and the fat old dog. I went into the cluttered living-room, where the springs were coming out of the sofa and there was no rug on the floor, and six kids apparently slept in the old brass bed in the corner. The television set was maybe four years old, but it was the best and biggest made that year. It formed a sort of shrine at one end of the room, with a piece of red cloth laid over its top.

I took the back off and looked in. I don't know what I expected to see. It just seemed odd to me that a man would go to all the trouble of faking up a truck and tinkering with television sets for nothing. And apparently he hadn't. What I did see I didn't understand, but even to my inexpert eye it was obvious that Mr. Jones had done something quite peculiar to the wiring inside.

A totally unfamiliar component roosted on the side of the case, a little gadget not much bigger than my two thumbnails.

I replaced the back and turned the set on. As Mrs. Tate said, it worked real good. Better than it had any business to. I got a peculiar hunch that Mr. Jones had planned it that way, so that no other serviceman would have to be called. I got the hunch that that component was important somehow to Mr. Jones.

I wondered how many other such components he had put in television sets in this area, and what they were for.

I turned off the set and went

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outside. Doc was still talking to Sally.

". . . some further tests he wants to make," I heard him say. "I can take you and Billy back right now . . ."

Sally looked doubtful and was about to speak. But the decision was made for her. The boy cried out wildly, "No! No!" With the frantic strength of a young animal he twisted out of his mother's arms, dropped to the ground, and sped away into the brush so swiftly that nobody had a chance even to grab for him.

Sally smiled. "All them shiny machines and the funny smells frightened him," she said. "He don't want to go back. Isn't anything wrong with him, is there? The other doctor said he was all right."

"No," said Doc reluctantly. "Just something about the X-rays he wanted to check on. It could be important for the future. Tell you what, Sally. You talk to the boy, and I'll come back in a day or two."

"Well," she said. "All right."

Doc hesitated, and then said, "Would you want me to speak to the sheriff about finding this man? If that's his child he should pay something for its support."

A wistful look came into her eyes. "I always thought maybe if he knew about the baby—"

Mrs. Tate didn't give her time to finish. "Yes, indeed," she said. "You speak to the sheriff. Time somebody did something about this, 'fore that brat's a man grown himself."

"Well," said Doc, "we can try."

He gave a last baffled glance at the woods where the boy had disappeared, and then we said goodbye and got into the station wagon and drove away. The sky was dark overhead now, and the air was heavy with the smell of rain.

"What do you think?" I said finally.

Doc shook his head. "I'm damned if I know. Apparently the external characteristics bred true. If the others did—"

"Then the father must be a mutant too. We just push it back one generation."

"That's the simplest explanation," Doc said.

"Is there any other?"

Doc didn't answer that. We passed through Possum Creek, and it began to rain.

"What about the television set?" he asked.

I told him. "But you'd have to have Jud or one of the boys from Newhale Appliance look at it, to say what it was."

"It smells," said Doc. "It stinks, right out loud."

The bolt of lightning came so quickly and hit so close that I wasn't conscious of anything but a great flare of livid green. Doc yelled. The station wagon slewed

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on the road that now had a thin film of mud over it, and I saw trees rushing at us, their tops bent by a sudden wind so that they seemed to be literally leaping forward. There was no thunder. I remembered that, I don't know why. The station wagon tipped over and hit the trees. There was a crash. The door flew open and I fell out through a wet whipping tangle of branches and on down to the steep-tilted ground below. I kept on falling, right down the slope, until a gully pocket caught and held me. I lay there dazed, staring up at the station wagon that now hung over my head. I saw Doc's legs come out of it, out the open door. He was all right. He was letting himself down to the ground. And then the lightning came again.

It swallowed the station wagon and the trees and Doc in a ball of green fire, and when it went away the trees were scorched and the paint was blistered on the wrecked car, and Doc was rolling over and over down the slope, very slowly, as if he was tired and did not want to hurry. He came to rest not three feet away from me. His hair and his clothes were smoldering, but he wasn't worrying about it. He wasn't worrying about anything, any more. And for the second time there had not been any thunder, close at hand where the lightning was.

The rain came down on Doc in heavy sheets, and put the smoldering fire out.

Jim Bossert had just come from posting Doc Callendar's body. For the first time I found myself almost liking him, he looked so sick and beat-out. I pushed the bottle toward him, and he drank out of it and then lighted a cigarette and just sat there shaking.

"It was lightning," he said. "No doubt at all."

Ed Betts, the sheriff, said, "Hank still insists there was something screwy about it."

Bossert shook his head at me. "Lightning."

"Or a heavy electric charge," I said. "That comes to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"But you saw it hit, Hank."

"Twice," I said. "Twice."

We were in Bossert's office at the hospital. It was late in the afternoon, getting on for supper time. I reached for the bottle again, and Ed said quietly,

"Lightning does do that, you know. In spite of the old saying."

"The first time, it missed," I said. "Just. Second time it didn't. If I hadn't been thrown clear I'd be dead too. And there wasn't any thunder."

"You were dazed," Bossert said. "The first shock stunned you."

"It was green," I said.

"Fireballs often are."

"But not lightning."

"Atmospheric freak." Ed turned

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to Jim Bossert. "Give him something and send him home."

Bossert nodded and got up, but I said, "No. I've got to write up a piece on Doc for tomorrow's paper. See you."

I didn't want to talk any more. I went out and got my car and drove back to town. I felt funny. Hollow, cold, with a veil over my brain so I couldn't see anything clearly or think about anything clearly. I stopped at the store and bought another bottle to see me through the night, and a feeling of cold evil was in me, and I thought of green, silent lightning, and little gimcracks that didn't belong in a television set, and the grave wise face of a child who was not quite human. The face wavered and became the face of a man. A man from Hryllianu.

I drove home, to the old house where nobody lives now but me. I wrote my story about Doc, and when I was through it was dark and the bottle was nearly empty. I went to bed.

I dreamed Doc Callendar called me on the phone and said, "I've found him but you'll have to hurry." And I said, "But you're dead. Don't call me, Doc, please don't." But the phone kept ringing and ringing, and after a while I woke part way up and it really was ringing. It was two-forty-nine A.M.

It was Ed Betts. "Fire up at the hospital, Hank. I thought you'd want to know. The south wing. Gotta go now."

He hung up and I began to put clothes on the leaden dummy that was me. The south wing, I thought, and sirens went whooping up Goat Hill. The south wing. That's where X-ray is. That's where the pictures of the boy's insides are on file.

What a curious coincidence, I thought.

I drove after the sirens up Goat Hill, through the clear cool night with half a moon shining silver on the ridges, and Buckhorn standing calm and serene against the stars, thinking the lofty thoughts that seem to be reserved for mountains.

The south wing of the hospital burned brightly, a very pretty orange color against the night.

I pulled off the road and parked well below the center of activity and started to walk the rest of the way. Patients were being evacuated from the main building. People ran with things in their hands. Firemen yelled and wrestled with hoses and streams of water arced over the flames. I didn't think they were going to save the south wing. I thought they would be doing well to save the hospital.

Another unit of the fire department came hooting and clanging up the road behind me. I stepped off the shoulder and as I did so I looked down to be sure of my footing. A flicker of movement on

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the slope about ten feet below caught my eye. Dimly, in the reflected glow of the fire, I saw the girl.

She was slim and light as a gazelle, treading her furtive way among the trees. Her hair was short and curled close to her head. In that light it was merely dark, but I knew it would be red in the sunshine, with glints of silver in it. She saw me or heard me, and she stopped for a second or two, startled, looking up. Her eyes shone like two coppery sparks, as the eyes of an animal shine, weird in the pale oval of her face. Then she turned and ran.

I went after her. She ran fast, and I was in lousy shape. But I was thinking about Doc.

I caught her.

It was dark all around us under the trees, but the firelight and the moonlight shone together into the clearing where we were. She didn't struggle or fight me. She turned around kind of light and stiff to face me, holding herself away from me as much as she could with my hands gripping her arms.

"What do you want with me?" she said, in a breathless little voice. It was accented, and sweet as a bird's. "Let me go."

I said, "What relation are you to the boy?"

That startled her. I saw her eyes widen, and then she turned her head and looked toward the darkness under the trees. "Please let me go," she said, and I thought that some new fear had come to her.

I shook her, feeling her small arms under my hands, wanting to break them, wanting to torture her because of Doc. "How was Doc killed?" I asked her. "Tell me. Who did it, and how?"

She stared at me. "Doc?" she repeated. "I do not understand." Now she began to struggle. "Let me go! You hurt me."

"The green lightning," I said. "A man was killed by it this morning. My friend. I want to know about it."

"Killed?" she whispered. "Oh, no. No one has been killed."

"And you set that fire in the hospital, didn't you? Why? Why were those films such a threat to you? Who are you? Where—"

"Hush," she said. "Listen."

I listened. There were sounds, soft and stealthy, moving up the slope toward us.

"They're looking for me," she whispered. "Please let me go. I don't know about your friend, and the fire was—necessary. I don't want anyone hurt, and if they find you like this—"

I dragged her back into the shadows underneath the trees. There was a huge old maple there with a gnarly trunk. We stood behind it, and now I had my arm around her waist and her head pressed back against my shoulder, and my right hand over her mouth.

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"Where do you come from?" I asked her, with my mouth close to her ear. "Where is Hrylliannu?"

Her body stiffened. It was a nice body, very much like the boy's in some ways, delicately made but strong, and with superb coordination. In other ways it was not like the boy's at all. I was thinking of her as an enemy, but it was impossible not to think of her as a woman, too.

She said, her voice muffled under my hand, "Where did you hear that name?"

"Never mind," I said. "Just answer me."

She wouldn't.

"Where do you live now? Somewhere near here?"

She only strained to get away.

"All right," I said. "We'll go now. Back up to the hospital. The sheriff wants to see you."

I started to drag her away up the hill, and then two men came into the light of the clearing.

One was slender and curly-headed in that particular way I was beginning to know. He looked pleasantly excited, pleasantly stimulated, as though by a game in which he found enjoyment. His eyes picked up the fitful glow of the fire and shone eerily, as the girl's had.

The other man was a perfectly ordinary type. He was dark and heavy-set and tall, and his khaki pants sagged under his belly. His face was neither excited nor pleasant. It was obvious that to him this was no game. He carried a heavy automatic, and I thought he was perfectly prepared to use it.

I was afraid of him.

". . . to send a dame, anyway," he was saying.

"That's your prejudice speaking," said the curly-haired man. "She was the only one to send." He gestured toward the flames. "How can you doubt it?"

"She's been caught."

"Not Vadi." He began to call softly. "Vadi? Vadi!"

The girl's lips moved under my hand. I bent to hear, and she said in the faint ghost of a whisper:

"If you want to live, let me go to them."

The big dark man said grimly, "She's been caught. We'd better do something about it, and do it quick."

He started across the clearing.

The girl's lips shaped one word. "Please!"

The dark man came with his big gun, and the curly-headed one came a little behind him, walking as a stalking cat walks, soft and springy on its toes. If I dragged the girl away they would hear me. If I stayed where I was, they would walk right onto me. Either way, I thought, I would pretty surely go to join Doc on the cold marble.

I let the girl go.

She ran out toward them. I

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stood stark and frozen behind the maple tree, waiting for her to turn and say the word that would betray me.

She didn't turn, and she didn't say the word. The curly-headed man put his arms around her and they talked rapidly for perhaps half a minute, and I heard her tell the dark man that she had only waited to be sure they would not be able to put the fire out too soon. Then all three turned and went quickly away among the dark trees.

I stayed where I was for a minute, breathing hard, trying to think. Then I went hunting for the sheriff.

By the time I found Ed Betts, of course, it was already too late. But he sent a car out anyway. They didn't find a trace of anyone on the road who answered the descriptions I gave.

Ed looked at me closely in the light of the dying fire, which they had finally succeeded in bringing under control. "Don't get sore at me now, Hank," he said. "But are you real sure you saw these people?"

"I'm sure," I said. I could still, if I shut my eyes and thought about it, *feel* the girl's body in my arms. "Her name was Vadi. Now I want to talk to Croft."

Croft was the Fire Marshal. I watched the boys pouring water on what was left of the south wing, which was nothing more than a pile of hot embers with some pieces of wall standing near it. Jim Bossert joined us, looking exhausted and grimy. He was too tired even to curse. He just wailed a little about the loss of all his fine X-ray equipment, and all his records.

"I met the girl who did it," I said. "Ed doesn't believe me."

"Girl?" said Bossert, staring.

"Girl. Apparently an expert at this sort of thing." I wondered what the curly-haired man was to her. "Was anybody hurt?"

"By the grace of God," said Bossert, "no."

"How did it start?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I woke up and every window in the south wing was spouting flame like a volcano."

I glanced at Ed, who shrugged. "Could have been a short in that high-voltage equipment."

Bossert said, "What kind of a girl? A lunatic?"

"Another one like the boy. There was a man with her, maybe the boy's father, I don't know. The third one was just a man. Mean looking bastard with a gun. She said the fire was necessary."

"All this, just to get rid of some films?"

"It must be important to them," I said. "They already killed Doc. They tried to kill me. What's a fire?"

Ed Betts swore, his face twisted between unbelief and worry. Then

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Croft came up. Ed asked him, "What started the fire?"

Croft shook his head. "Too early to tell yet. Have to wait till things cool down. But I'll lay you any odds you like it was started by chemicals."

"Deliberately?"

"Could be," said Croft, and went away again.

I looked at the sky. It was almost dawn, that beautiful bleak time when the sky is neither dark nor light and the mountains are cut from black cardboard, without perspective. I said, "I'm going up to the Tates'. I'm worried about the boy."

"All right," said Ed quickly, "I'll go with you. In my car. We'll stop in town and pick up Jud. I want him to see that teevee."

"The hell with Jud," I said. "I'm in a hurry." And suddenly I was. Suddenly I was terribly afraid for that grave-faced child who was obviously the unwitting key to some secret that was important enough to justify arson and murder to those who wanted to keep it.

Ed hung right behind me. He practically shoved me into his car. It had COUNTY SHERIFF painted on its door, and I thought of Doc's station wagon with its COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE, and it seemed like a poor omen but there was nothing I could do about it.

There was nothing I could do about stopping for Jud Spofford, either. Ed went in and routed him out of bed, taking the car keys with him. I sat smoking and looking up at Tunkhannock Ridge, watching it brighten to gold at the crest as the sun came up. Finally Jud came out grumbling and climbed in the back seat, a tall lanky young fellow in a blue coverall with *Newhale Electric Appliance Co.* embroidered in red on the pocket. His little wife watched from the doorway, holding her pink wrapper together.

We went away up Tunkhannock Ridge. There was still a black smudge of smoke above the hospital on Goat Hill. The sky over Buckhorn Mountain was clear and bright.

Sally Tate and her boy were already gone.

Mrs. Tate told us about it, while we sat on the lumpy sofa in the living room and the fat old dog watched us through the screen door, growling. Sally's sisters, or some of them at least, were in the kitchen listening.

"Never was so surprised at anything in my life," said Mrs. Tate. "Pa had just gone out to the barn with Harry and J. P.—them's the two oldest girls' husbands, you know. I and the girls was washing up after breakfast, and I heard this car drive in. Sure enough it was him. I went out on the stoop—"

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"What kind of a car?" asked Ed.

"Same panel truck he was driving before, only the name was painted out. Kind of a dirty blue all over. 'Well,' I says, 'I never expected to see *your* face around here again!', I says, and he says—"

Boiled down to reasonable length, the man had said that he had always intended to come back for Sally, and that if he had known about the boy he would have come much sooner. He had been away, he said, on business, and had only just got back and heard about Sally bringing the child in to the hospital, and knew that it must be his. He had gone up to the house, and Sally had come running out into his arms, her face all shining. Then they went in together to see the boy, and Bill Jones had fondled him and called him Son, and the boy had watched him sleepily and without affection.

"They talked together for a while, private," said Mrs. Tate, "and then Sally come and said he was going to take her away and marry her and make the boy legal, and would I help her pack. And I did, and they went away together, the three of 'em. Sally didn't know when she'd be back."

She shook her head, smoothing her hair with knotted fingers. "I just don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

"What?" I asked her. "Was there something wrong?" I knew there was, but I wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Nothing you could lay your hand to," she said. "And Sally was so happy. She was just fit to burst. And he *was* real pleasant, real polite to me and Pa. We asked him about all them lies he told, and he said they wasn't lies at all. He said the man he was working for did plan to open a store in Newhale, but then he got sick and the plan fell through. He said his name was Bill Jones, and showed us some cards and things to prove it. And he said Sally just misunderstood the name of the place he come from because he give it the old Spanish pronunciation."

"What did he say it was really?" Ed asked, and she looked surprised.

"Now I think of it, I guess he didn't say."

"Well, where's he going to live, with Sally?"

"He isn't settled yet. He's got two or three prospects, different places. She was so happy," said Mrs. Tate, "and I ought to be too, 'cause Lord knows I've wished often enough he would come back and get that peaky brat of his, and Sally too if she was minded. But I ain't. I ain't happy at all, and I don't know why."

"Natural reaction," said Ed Betts heartily. "You miss your

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daughter, and probably the boy too, more than you know."

"I've had daughters married before. It was something about this man. Something—" Mrs. Tate hesitated a long time, searching for a word. "Queer," she said at last. "Wrong. I couldn't tell you what. Like the boy, only more so. The boy has Sally in him. This one—" She made a gesture with her hands. "Oh, well, I expect I'm just looking for trouble."

"I expect so, Mrs. Tate," said Ed, "but you be sure and get in touch with me if you don't hear from Sally in a reasonable time. And now I'd like this young man to look at your teevee."

Jud, who had been sitting stiff and uncomfortable during the talking, jumped up and practically ran to the set. Mrs. Tate started to protest, but Ed said firmly, "This may be important, Mrs. Tate. Jud's a good serviceman, he won't upset anything."

"I hope not," she said. "It does run real good."

Jud turned it on and watched it for a minute. "It sure does," he said. "And in this location, too."

He took the back off and looked inside. After a minute he let go a long low whistle.

"What is it?" said Ed, going closer.

"Damnedest thing," said Jud. "Look at that wiring. He's loused up the circuits, all right—and there's a couple tubes in there like I never saw before." He was getting excited. "I'd have to tear the whole thing down to see what he's really done, but somehow he's boosted the power and the sensitivity way up. The guy must be a wizard."

Mrs. Tate said loudly, "You ain't tearing anything down, young man. You just leave it like it is."

I said, "What about that dingus on the side?"

"Frankly," said Jud, "that stops me. It's got a wire to it, but it don't seem to hitch up anywhere in the set." He turned the set off and began to poke gently around. "See here, this little hairline wire that comes down and bypasses the whole chassis? It cuts in here on the live line, so it draws power whether the set's on or not. But I don't see how it can have anything to do with the set operating."

"Well, take it out," said Ed. "We'll take it down to the shop and see whether we can make anything of it."

"Okay," said Jud, ignoring Mrs. Tate's cry of protest. He reached in and for the first time actually touched the enigmatic little unit, feeling for what held it to the side of the case.

There was a sharp pop and a small bright flare, and Jud leaped back with a howl. He put his scorched fingers in his mouth and his eyes watered. Mrs. Tate cried, "Now, you've done it, you've

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ruined my teevee!" There was a smell of burning on the air. The girls came running out of the kitchen and the old dog barked and clawed the screen.

One of the girls said, "What happened?"

"I don't know," Jud said. "The goddamned thing just popped like a bomb when I touched it."

There was a drift of something gray—ash or dust—and that was all. Even the hairline wire was consumed.

"It looks," I said, "as though Mr. Jones didn't want anybody else to look over his technological achievements."

Ed grunted. He looked puzzled and irresolute. "Hurt the set any?" he asked.

"Dunno," said Jud, and turned it on.

It ran as perfectly as before.

"Well," said Mrs. Tate, "thank goodness."

"Yeah," said Ed. "I guess that's all, then. What do you say, Hank? We might as well go."

I said we might as well. We climbed back into Ed's car and started—the second time for me—back down Tunkhannock Ridge.

Jud was still sucking his fingers. He wondered out loud if the funny-looking tubes in the set would explode the same way if you touched them, and I said probably. Ed didn't say anything. He was frowning deeply. I asked him what he thought about it.

"I'm trying to figure the angle," he said. "This Bill Jones. What does he get out of it? What does he *make?* On the television gag, I mean. People usually want to get paid for work like that."

Jud offered the opinion that the man was a nut. "One of these crazy guys like in the movies, always inventing things that make trouble. But I sure would like to know what he done to that set."

"Well," said Ed, "I can't see what more we can do. He did come back for the girl, and apart from that he hasn't broken any laws."

"Hasn't he?" I said, looking out the window. We were coming to the place where Doc had died. There was no sign of a storm today. Everything was bright, serene, peaceful. But I could feel the cold feeling of being watched. Someone, somewhere, knew me. He watched where I went and what I did, and decided whether or not to send the green lightning to slay me. It was a revelation, like the moments you have as a young child when you become acutely conscious of God. I began to shake. I wanted to crawl down in the back seat and hide. Instead I sat where I was and tried to keep the naked terror from showing too much. And I watched the sky. And nothing happened.

Ed Betts didn't mention it, but he began to drive faster and faster until I thought we weren't going

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to need any green lightning. He didn't slow down until we hit the valley. I think he would have been glad to get rid of me, but he had to haul me all the way back up Goat Hill to get my car. When he did let me off, he said gruffly,

"I'm not going to listen to you again till you've had a good twelve hours' sleep. And I need some myself. So long."

I went home, but I didn't sleep. Not right away. I told my assistant and right-hand man, Joe Streckfoos, that the paper was all his today, and then I got on the phone. I drove the local exchange crazy, but by about five o'clock that afternoon I had the information I wanted.

I had started with a map of the area on my desk. Not just Newhale, but the whole area, with Buckhorn Mountain roughly at the center and showing the hills and valleys around its northern periphery. By five o'clock the map showed a series of red pencil dots. If you connected them together with a line they formed a sprawling, irregular, but unbroken circle drawn around Buckhorn, never exceeding a certain number of miles in distance from the peak.

Every pencil dot represented a television set that had within the last three years been serviced by a red-haired man—for free.

I looked at the map for a long time, and then I went out in the yard and looked up at Buckhorn. It seemed to me to stand very high, higher than I remembered. From flank to crest the green unbroken forest covered it. In the winter time men hunted there for bear and deer, and I knew there were a few hunting lodges, hardly more than shacks, on its lower slopes. These were not used in summer, and apart from the hunters no one ever bothered to climb those almost perpendicular sides, hanging onto the trees as onto a ladder, up to the fog and storm that plagued the summit.

There were clouds there now. It almost seemed that Buckhorn pulled them down over his head like a cowl, until the gray trailing edges hid him almost to his feet. I shivered and went inside and shut the door. I cleaned my automatic and put in a full clip. I made a sandwich and drank the last couple of drinks in last night's bottle. I laid out my boots and my rough-country pants and a khaki shirt. I set the alarm. It was still broad daylight. I went to bed.

The alarm woke me at eleven thirty. I did not turn on any lamps. I don't know why, except that I still had that naked feeling of being watched. Light enough came to me anyhow from the intermittent sulfurous flares in the sky. There was a low mutter of thunder in the west. I put the automatic in a shoulder holster under my shirt, not to hide it but

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because it was out of the way there. When I was dressed I went downstairs and out the back door, heading for the garage.

It was quiet, the way a little town can be quiet at night. I could hear the stream going over the stones, and the million little songs of the crickets, the peepers, and the frogs were almost stridently loud.

Then they began to stop. The frogs first, in the marshy places besides the creek. Then the crickets and the peepers. I stopped too, in the black dark beside a clump of rhododendrons my mother used to be almost tiresomely proud of. My skin turned cold and the hair bristled on the back of my neck and I heard soft padding footsteps and softer breathing on the heavy air.

Two people had waded the creek and come up into my yard.

There was a flare and a grumble in the sky and I saw them close by, standing on the grass, looking up at the unlighted house.

One of them was the girl Vadi, and she carried something in her hands. The other was the heavy-set dark man with the gun.

"It's okay," he told her. "He's sleeping. Get busy."

I slid the automatic into my palm and opened my mouth to speak, and then I heard her say:

"You won't give him a chance to get out?"

Her tone said she knew the answer to that one before she asked it. But he said with furious sarcasm:

"Why certainly, and then you can call the sheriff and explain why you burned the house down. And the hospital. Christ. I told Arnek you weren't to be trusted." He gave her a rough shove. "Get with it."

Vadi walked five careful paces away from him. Then very swiftly she threw away, in two different directions, whatever it was she carried. I heard the two things fall, rustling among grass and branches where it might take hours to find them even by daylight. She spun around. "Now," she said in a harsh defiant voice, "what are you going to do?"

There was a moment of absolute silence, so full of murder that the far-off lightning seemed feeble by comparison. Then he said:

"All right, let's get out of here."

She moved to join him, and he waited until she was quite close to him. Then he hit her. She made a small bleating sound and fell down. He started to kick her, and then I jumped out and hit him over the ear with the flat of the automatic. It was his turn to fall down.

Vadi got up on her hands and knees. She stared at me, sobbing a little with rage and pain. Blood was running from the corner of her mouth. I took the man's gun and threw it far off and it splashed

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in the creek. Then I got down beside the girl.

"Here," I said. "Have my handkerchief."

She took it and held it to her mouth. "You were outside here all the time," she said. She sounded almost angry.

"It just happened that way. I still owe you thanks for my life. And my house. Though you weren't so tender about the hospital."

"There was no one to be killed there. I made sure. A building one can always rebuild, but a life is different."

She looked at the unconscious man. Her eyes burned with that catlike brilliance in the lightning flares.

"I could kill him," she said, "with pleasure."

"Who is he?"

"My brother's partner." She glanced toward Buckhorn and the light went out of her eyes. Her head became bowed.

"Your brother sent you to kill me?"

"He didn't say—"

"But you knew."

"When Marlin came with me I knew."

She had begun to tremble.

"Do you make a career of arson?"

"Arson? Oh. The setting of fires. No. I am a chemist. And I wish I—"

She caught herself fiercely and would not finish.

I said, "Those things are listening devices, then."

She had to ask me what I meant. Her mind was busy with some thorny darkness of its own.

"The little gadgets your brother put in the television sets," I said. "I figured that's what they were when I saw how they were placed. A string of sentry posts all around the center of operations, little ears to catch every word of gossip, because if any of the local people get suspicious they're bound to talk about it and so give warning. He heard my calls this afternoon, didn't he? That's why he sent you. And he heard Doc and me at the Tates'. That's why—"

Moving with that uncanny swiftness of hers, she rose and ran away from me. It was like before. She ran fast, and I ran after her. She went splashing through the shallow stream and the water flew back against me, wetting my face, spattering my clothes. On the far bank I caught her, as I had before. But this time she fought me.

"Let me go," she said, and beat her hands against me. "Do you know what I've done for you? I've asked for the knife for myself. Let me go, you clumsy fool—"

I held her tighter. Her soft curls pressed against my cheek. Her body strove against me, and it was not soft but excitingly strong.

"—before I regret it," she said, and I kissed her.

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It was strange, what happened then.

I've kissed girls who didn't want to be kissed, and I've kissed girls who didn't like me particularly. I've kissed a couple of the touch-me-not kind who shrink from any sort of physical contact. I've had my face slapped. But I never had a girl *withdraw* from me the way she did. It was like something closing, folding up, shutting every avenue of contact, and yet she never moved. In fact she had stopped moving entirely. She just stood with my arms around her and my lips on hers, and kind of a coldness came out of her, a rejection so total I couldn't even get mad. I was shocked, and very much puzzled, but you can't get mad at a thing that isn't personal. This was too deep for that. And suddenly I thought of the boy.

"A different breed," I said. "Worlds apart. Is that it?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Worlds apart."

And the coldness spread through me. I stood on the bank of the stream in the warm night, the bank where I had stood ten thousand times before, boy and man, and saw the strange shining of her eyes, and I was more than cold, I was afraid. I stepped back away from her, still holding her but in a different way.

"It wasn't like this," I said, "between your brother and Sally Tate."

The girl-thing said, "My brother Arnek is a corrupt man."

"Vadi," I said. "Where is Hryllianu?"

The girl-thing looked past my shoulder and said, "Marlin is running away."

I looked too, and it was so. The big man's head was harder than I had thought. He had got up, and I saw him blundering rapidly away along the side of my house, heading for the street.

"Well," I said, "he's gone now. You must have come in a car, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Good," I said. "It won't be challenged as soon as mine. We'll take it."

"Where are you going?" she asked, catching her breath sharply.

"Where I was going when you stopped me. Up Buckhorn."

"Oh no," she said. "No, you can't, you mustn't." She was human again, and afraid. "I saved your life, isn't that enough for you? You'll never live to climb Buckhorn and neither will I if—"

"Did Sally and the boy live to climb it?" I asked her, and she hung her head and nodded. "Then you'll see to it that we do."

"But tonight!" she said in a panic. "Not tonight!"

"What's so special about tonight?" She didn't answer, and I shook her. "What's going on up there?"

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She didn't answer that, either. She said with sudden fierceness, "All right, then, come on. Climb Buckhorn and see. And when you're dying, remember that I tried to stop you."

She didn't speak again. She led me without protest to the car parked on the dirt road. It was a panel truck. By day it would have been a dirty blue.

"He's going to kill them, isn't he?" I said. "He killed Doc. You admit he wants to kill me. What's going to save Sally and the child?"

"You torture me," she said. "This is a world of torture. Go on. Go on, and get it done."

I started the panel truck. Like the television set, it worked better than it had any business to. It fled with uncanny strength and swiftness over the dirt roads toward Buckhorn, soft-sprung as a cloud, silent as a dream.

"It's a pity," I said. "Your brother has considerable genius."

She laughed. A bitter laugh. "He couldn't pass his second year of technical training. That's why he's here."

She looked at Buckhorn as though she hated the mountain, and Buckhorn, invisible behind a curtain of storm, answered her look with a sullen curse, spoken in thunder.

I stopped at the last gas station on the road and honked the owner out of bed and told him to call Sheriff Betts and tell him where I'd gone. I didn't dare do it myself for fear Vadi would get away from me. The man was very resentful about being waked up. I hoped he would not take out his resentment by forgetting to call.

"You're pretty close to Buckhorn," I told him. "The neck you save may be your own."

I left him to ponder that, racing on toward the dark mountain in that damned queer car that made me feel like a character in one of my own bad dreams, with the girl beside me—the damned queer girl who was not quite human.

The road dropped behind us. We began to climb the knees of the mountain. Vadi told me where to turn, and the road became a track, and the track ended in the thick woods beside a rickety little lodge the size of a piano-box, with a garage behind it. The garage only looked rickety. The headlights showed up new and sturdy timbers on the inside.

I cut the motor and the lights and reached for the handbrake. Vadi must have been set on a hair-trigger waiting for that moment. I heard her move and there was a snap as though she had pulled something from a clip underneath the dashboard. The door on her side banged open.

I shouted to her to stop and sprang out of the truck to catch

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her. But she was already out of the garage, and she was waiting for me. Just as I came through the door there was a bolt of lightning, bright green, small and close at hand. I saw it coming. I saw her dimly in the backflash and knew that in some way she had made the lightning with a thing she held in her hand. Then it hit me and that was all.

When I came to I was all alone and the rain was falling on me just the way it had on Doc. . . .

But I wasn't dead.

I crawled around and finally managed to get up, feeling heavy and disjointed. My legs and arms flopped around as though the coordinating controls had been burned out. I stood inside the garage out of the rain, rubbing my numb joints and thinking.

All the steam had gone out of me. I didn't want to climb Buckhorn Mountain any more. It looked awfully black up there, and awfully lonesome, and God alone knew what was going on under the veil of cloud and storm that hid it. The lightning flashes —real sky-made lightning— showed me the dripping trees going right up into nothing, with the wind thrashing them, and then the following thunder cracked my eardrums. The rain hissed, and I thought, it's crazy for one man to go up there alone.

Then I thought about Sally Tate and the little red-headed kid, and I thought how Ed Betts might already be up there somewhere, plowing his way through the woods looking for me. I didn't know how long I'd been out.

I made sure I still had my gun, and I did have. I wished I had a drink, but that was hopeless. So I started out. I didn't go straight up the mountain. I figured the girl would have had time to find her brother and give him warning, and that he might be looking for me to come that way. I angled off to the east, where I remembered a ravine that might give me some cover. I'd been up Buckhorn before, but only by daylight, with snow on the ground and a couple of friends with me, and not looking for anything more sinister than a bear.

I climbed the steep flank of the mountain, leaning almost into it, worming and floundering and pulling my way between the trees. The rain fell and soaked me. The thunder was a monstrous presence, and the lightning was a great torch that somebody kept tossing back and forth so that sometimes you could see every vein of every leaf on the tree you were fighting with, and sometimes it was so dark that you knew the sun and stars hadn't been invented yet. I lost the ravine. I only knew I was still going up. There wasn't any doubt about

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that. After a while the rain slacked off and almost stopped.

In an interval between crashes of thunder I heard voices.

They were thin and far away. I tried to place them, and when I thought I had them pegged I started toward them. The steep pitch of the ground fell away into a dizzying downslope and I was almost running into a sort of long shallow trough, thickly wooded, its bottom hidden from any view at all except one directly overhead. And there were lights in it, or at least a light.

I slowed down and went more carefully, hoping the storm would cover any noise I made.

The voices went on, and now I could hear another sound, the scrinch and screek of metal rubbing on metal.

I was on the clearing before I knew it. And it wasn't a clearing at all really, just one of those natural open places where the soil is too thin to support trees and runs to brush instead. It wasn't much more than ten feet across. Almost beside me were a couple of tents so cleverly hidden among the trees that you practically had to fall on them, as I did, to find them at all.

From one of them came the sleepy sobbing of a child.

In the small clearing Vadi and Arnek were watching a jointed metal mast build itself up out of a pit in the ground. The top of it was already out of sight in the cloud but it was obviously taller than the trees. The lamp was on the ground beside the pit.

The faces of Vadi and her brother were both angry, both set and obstinate. Perhaps it was their mutual fury that made them seem less human, or more unhuman, than ever, the odd bone-structure of cheek and jaw accentuated, the whole head elongated, the silver-red hair fairly bristling, the copper-colored eyes glinting with that unpleasantly catlike brilliance in the light. They had been quarreling, and they still were, but not in English. Arnek had a look like a rattlesnake.

Vadi, I thought, was frightened. She kept glancing at the tents, and in a minute the big man, Marlin, came out of one of them. He was pressing a small bandage on the side of his head, over his ear. He looked tired and wet and foul-tempered, as though he had not had an easy time getting back to base.

He started right in on Vadi, cursing her because of what she had done.

Arnek said in English, "I didn't ask her to come here, and I'm sending her home tonight."

"That's great," Marlin said. "That's a big help. We'll have to move our base anyway now."

"Maybe not," said Arnek defiantly. He watched the slim mast

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stretching up and up with a soft screeking of its joints.

"You're a fool," said Marlin, in a tone of cold and bitter contempt. "You started this mess, Arnek. You had to play around with that girl and make a kid to give the show away. Then you pull that half-cocked trick with those guys in the station wagon and you can't even do that right. You kill the one but not the other. And then *she* louses up the only chance we got left. You know how much money we're going to lose? You know how long it'll take us to find a location half as good as this? You know what I ought to do?"

Arnek's voice was sharp, but a shade uncertain. "Oh, stop bitching and get onto those scanners. All we need is another hour and then they can whistle. And there are plenty of mountains."

"Are there," said Marlin, and looked again at Vadi. "And how long do you think she'll keep her mouth shut at *your* end?"

He turned and walked back into the tent. Arnek looked uncertainly at Vadi and then fixed his attention on the mast again. Vadi's face was the color of chalk. She started once toward the tent and Arnek caught her roughly and spoke to her in whatever language they used, and she stopped.

I slid around the back of the tents to the one Marlin was in. There was a humming and whining inside. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled carefully over the wet grass between the tents, toward the front. The mast apparently made its last joint because it stopped and Arnek said something to Vadi and they bent over what seemed to be a sunken control box in the ground. I took my chance and whipped in through the tent flap.

I didn't have long to look around. The space inside was crammed with what seemed to be electronic equipment. Marlin was sitting hunched up on a stool in front of a big panel with a dozen or so little screens on it like miniature television monitors. The screens, I just had time to see, showed an assortment of views of Buckhorn and the surrounding areas, and Marlin was apparently, by remote control, rotating one by one the distant receivers that sent the images to the screens. They must have been remarkably tight-beamed, because they were not much disturbed by static. I knew now how the eye of God had watched Doc and me on Tunkhannock Ridge.

I didn't know yet how the lightning-bolts were hurled, but I was pretty sure Ed Betts would get one if his car showed up on a scanner screen, and who would be the wiser? Poor Ed hit by lightning just like old Doc, and weren't the storms something fierce this summer?

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Marlin turned around and saw it wasn't Arnek. He moved faster than I would have thought possible. He scooped up the light stool he was sitting on and threw it at me, leaping sideways himself in a continuation of the same movement. In the second in which I was getting my head out of the way of the stool he pulled a gun. He had had a spare, just as he must have had a car stashed somewhere in or near the town.

He did not quite have time to fire. I shot him twice through the body. He dropped but I didn't know if he was dead. I kicked the gun out of his hand and jumped to stand flat against the canvas wall beside the front flap, not pressing against it. The canvas was light-proof, and the small lamps over the control panels did not throw shadows.

Arnek did not come in.

After a second or two I got nervous. I could hear him shouting "Marlin! Marlin!" I ran into the narrow space behind the banks of equipment, being extremely careful how I touched anything. I did not see any power leads. It dawned on me that all this stuff had come up out of a pit in the ground like the mast and that the generator must be down there below. The floor wasn't canvas at all, but some dark gray material to which the equipment was bolted.

I got my knife out and started to slit the canvas at the back. And suddenly the inside of the tent was full of green fire. It sparked off every metal thing and jarred the gun out of my hand. It nearly knocked me out again. But I was shielded by the equipment from the full force of the shock. It flicked off again almost at once. I got the canvas cut and squirmed through it and then I put three or four shots at random into the back of the equipment just for luck.

Then I raced around the front and caught Arnek just as he was deciding not to enter the tent after all.

He had a weapon in his hand like the one Vadi had used on me. I said, "Drop it," and he hesitated, looking evil and upset. "Drop it!" I told him again, and he dropped it. "Now stand away," I said. "Walk out toward your sister, real slow, one step at a time."

He walked, and I picked up the weapon.

"Good," I said. "Now we can all relax." And I called Sally Tate, telling her it was safe to come out now.

All this time since I was where I could see her Vadi had stood with one hand over her mouth, looking up into the mist.

Sally Tate came out of the other tent. She was carrying the boy, and both their faces were

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pale and puffy-eyed and streaked with tears.

"It's all right now," I said. "You can go—" I was going to say "home," and then there was a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder, that was hardly a sound at all, but more of a great sigh. The air pressed down on me and the grass was flattened as by a down-driven wind and all the branches of the trees bowed. The mist rolled, boiled, was rent, torn apart, scattered.

Something had come to rest against the top of the mast.

Arnek turned and ran to Vadi and I did not stop him. I moved closer to Sally Tate, standing with her mouth open and her eyes big and staring.

The mast began to contract downward, bringing the thing with it.

I suppose I knew then what the thing was. I just didn't want to admit it. It was cylindrical and slender, about fifty feet long, with neither wings nor jets. I watched it come slowly and gracefully down, [illegible]ched by its needle-sharp [illegible] to the magnetic grap- [illegible] the mast. The mast acted as automatic guide and stabilizer, dropping the ship into a slot between the trees as neatly as you would drop a slice of bread into the slot of a toaster.

And all the time the bitter breath of fear was blowing on me and little things were falling into place in my mind and I realized that I had known the answer for some time and had simply refused to see it.

A port opened in the side of the ship. And as though that was the final symbolic trigger I needed, I got the full impact of what I was seeing. Suddenly the friendly protecting sky seemed to have been torn open above me as the veiling cloud was torn, and through the rent the whole Outside poured in upon me, the black freezing spaces of the galaxy, the blaze and strangeness of a billion billion suns. I shrank beneath that vastness. I was nothing, nobody, an infinitesimal fleck in a cosmos too huge to be borne. The stars had come too close. I wanted to get down and howl and grovel like a dog.

No wonder Arnek and Vadi and the boy were queer. They were not mutants—they were not even that Earthly. They came from another world.

A little ladder had extended itself downward from the port. A man came briskly to the ground and spoke to Arnek. He resembled Arnek except that he was dressed in a single close-fitting garment of some dark stuff. Arnek pointed to me, speaking rapidly. The man turned and looked at me, his body expressing alarm. I felt childish and silly standing there with my little gun. Lone man of

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Earth at an incredible Thermopylae, saying, "You shall not land."

All the time Arnek and the stranger had been talking there had been other activities around the ship. A hatch in the stern had opened and now from both hatches people began to come out helter-skelter as though haste was the chief necessity. There were men and women both. They all looked human. Slightly odd, a little queer perhaps, but human. They were different types, different colors, sizes, and builds, but they all fitted in somewhere pretty close to Earthly types. They all looked a little excited, a little scared, considerably bewildered by the place in which they found themselves. Some of the women were crying. There were maybe twenty people in all.

I understood then exactly what Arnek and Marlin had been up to and it seemed so grotesquely familiar and prosaic that I began to laugh.

"Wetbacks," I said aloud. "That's what you're doing, smuggling aliens."

Aliens. Yes indeed.

It did not seem so funny when I thought about it.

The stranger turned around and shouted an order. The men and women stopped, some of them still on the ladders. More voices shouted. Then those on the ladders were shoved aside and eight men in uniform jumped out, with weapons in their hands.

Sally Tate let go one wild wavering shriek. The child fell out of her arms. He sat on the wet ground with the wind knocked out of him so he couldn't cry, blinking in shocked dismay. Sally tottered. Her big strong healthy body was sunken and collapsed, every muscle slack. She turned and made a staggering lunge for the tent and fell partly in through the doorway, crawled the rest of the way like a hurt dog going under a porch, and lay there with the flap pulled over her head.

I didn't blame her. I don't even know what obscure force kept me from joining her.

Of the eight men, five were not human. Two of them not even remotely.

I can't describe them. I can't remember what they looked like, not clearly.

Let's be honest. I don't *want* to remember.

I suppose if you were used to things like that all your life it would be different. You wouldn't think anything about it.

I was not used to things like that. I knew that I never would be, not if we ourselves achieved space-flight tomorrow. I'm too old, too set in the familiar pattern of existence that has never been broken for man since the beginning. Perhaps others are more resilient. They're welcome to it.

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I picked up the boy and ran.

It came on again to rain. I ran down Buckhorn Mountain, carrying the boy in my arms. And the green lightning came after us, hunting us along the precipitous slope.

The boy had got his breath back. He asked me why we had to die. I said never mind, and kept on running.

I fell with him and rolled to the bottom of a deep gully. We were shaken. We lay in the dripping brush looking up at the lightning lancing across the night above us. After a while it stopped. I picked him up again and crept silently along the gully and onto the slope below.

And nearly got shot by Ed Betts and a scratch posse, picking their cautious way up the mountainside.

One of the men took the child out of my arms. I hung onto Ed and said inanely, "They're landing a load of wetbacks."

"Up there?"

"They've got a ship," I told him. "They're aliens, Ed. Real aliens."

I began to laugh again. I didn't want to. It just seemed such a hellishly clever play on words that I couldn't help it.

Fire bloomed suddenly in the night above us. A second later the noise of the explosion reached us.

I stopped laughing. "They must be destroying their installations. Pulling out. Marlin said they'd have to. Christ. And Sally is still up there."

I ran back up the mountain, clambering bearlike through the trees. The others followed.

There was one more explosion. Then I came back to the edge of the clearing. Ed was close behind me. I don't think any of the others were really close enough to see. There was a lot of smoke. The tents were gone. Smoking trees were slowly toppling in around the edges of a big raw crater in the ground. There was no trace of the instruments that had been in the tents.

The ship was still there. The crew, human and unhuman, were shoving the last of the passengers back into the ship. There was an altercation going on beside the forward port.

Vadi had her arm around Sally Tate. She was obviously trying to get her aboard. I thought I understood then why Sally and the boy were still alive. Probably Vadi had been insisting that her brother send them along where they wouldn't be any danger to him, and he hadn't quite had the nerve to cross her. He was looking uncertain now, and it was the officer who was making the refusal. Sally herself seemed to be in a stupor.

Vadi thrust past the officer and led Sally toward the ladder. And Sally went, willingly. I like to remember that, now, when she's gone.

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I think—I hope—that Sally's all right out there. She was younger and simpler than I, she could adapt. I think she loved Bill Jones—Arnek—enough to leave her child, leave her family, leave her world, and still be happy near him.

Ed and I started to run across the clearing. Ed had not said a word. But his face was something to look at.

They saw us coming but they didn't bother to shoot at us. They seemed in a tremendous hurry. Vadi screamed something, and I was sure it was in English and a warning to me, but I couldn't understand it. Then she was gone inside the ship and so were Arnek and Sally and the officer and crewmen, and the ladders went up and the ports shut.

The mooring mast began to rise and so did the ship, and the trees were bent with the force of its rising.

I knew then what the warning was.

I grabbed Ed bodily and hauled him back. The ship didn't have to be very high. Only above the trees. I hauled him as far as blind instinct told me I could go and then I yelled, "Get down! Get down!" to everybody within earshot and made frantic motions. It all took possibly thirty seconds. Ed understood and we flopped and hugged the ground.

The mast blew.

Dirt, rocks, pieces of tree rained down around us. The shock wave pounded our ears. A few moments later, derisive and powerful, a long thin whistling scream tore upward across the sky, and faded, and was gone.

We got up after a while and collected the muddy and startled posse and went to look at what was left of the clearing. There was nothing. Sally Tate was gone as though she had never existed. There was no shred of anything left to prove that what Ed and I had seen was real.

We made up a story, about a big helicopter and an alien racket. It wasn't too good a story, but it was better than the truth. Afterward, when we were calmer, Ed and I tried to figure it out for ourselves. How it was done, I mean, and why.

The "how" was easy enough, given the necessary technology. Pick a remote but not too inconveniently isolated spot, like the top of Buckhorn Mountain. Set up your secret installation—a simple one, so compact and carefully hidden that hunters could walk right over it and never guess it was there when it was not in use. On nights when conditions are right—that is to say, when the possibility of being observed is nearest to zero—run your cargo in and land it. We figured that the ship we saw wasn't big enough to transport that many people very

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far. We figured it was a landing-craft, ferrying the passengers down from a much bigger mother-ship way beyond the sky.

A star-ship. It sounded ridiculous when you said it. But we had seen the members of the crew. It is generally acknowledged by nearly everybody now that there is no intelligent life of any terrestrial sort on the other planets of our own system. So they had to come from farther out.

Why? That was a tougher one to solve. We could only guess at it.

"There must be a hell of a big civilization out there," said Ed, "to build the ships and travel in them. They obviously know we're here."

Uneasy thought.

"Why haven't they spoken to us?" he wondered. "Let us in on it too."

"I suppose," I said, "they're waiting for us to develop space-flight on our own. Maybe it's a kind of test you have to pass to get in on their civilization. Or maybe they figure we're so backward they don't want to have anything to do with us, all our wars and all. Or both. Pick your own reason."

"Okay," said Ed. "But why dump their people on us like that? And how come Marlin, one of our own people, was in on it?"

"There *are* Earthmen who'll do anything for money," I said. "Like Marlin. It'd not be too hard to contact men like him, use them as local agents."

"As for why they dump their people on us," I went on, "it probably isn't legal, where they came from. Remember what Marlin said about Vadi? *How long will she keep her mouth shut at* your *end?* My guess is her brother was a failure at home and got into a dirty racket, and she was trying to get him out of it. There must be other worlds like Earth, too, or the racket wouldn't be financially sound. Not enough volume."

"But the wetbacks," Ed said. "Were they failures, too? People who couldn't compete in the kind of a society they must have? And how the hell many do you suppose they've run in on us already?"

I've wondered about that myself. How many aliens have Marlin, and probably others like him, taken off the star-boats and dressed and instructed and furnished with false papers, in return doubtless for all the valuables the poor devils had? How many of the people you see around you every day, the anonymous people that just look a little odd somehow, the people about whom you think briefly that they don't even look human —the queer ones you notice and then forget—how many of them *aren't* human at all in the sense that we understand that word?

Like the boy.

Sally Tate's family obviously didn't want him back. So I had

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myself appointed his legal guardian, and we get on fine together. He's a bright kid. His father may have been a failure in his own world, but on ours the half-bred child has an I.Q. that would frighten you. He's also a good youngster. I think he takes after his aunt.

I've thought of getting married since then, just to make a better home for the boy, and to fill up a void in my own life I'm beginning to feel. But I haven't quite done it yet. I keep thinking maybe Vadi will come back some day, walking with swift grace down the side of Buckhorn Mountain. I do not think it is likely, but I can't quite put it out of my mind. I remember the cold revulsion that there was between us, and then I wonder if that feeling would go on, or whether you couldn't get used to that idea of differentness in time.

The trouble is, I guess, that Vadi kind of spoiled me for the general run of women.

I wonder what her life is like in Hryllianu, and where it is. Sometimes on the bitter frosty nights when the sky is diamond-clear and the Milky Way glitters like the mouth of hell across it, I look up at the stars and wonder which one is hers. And old Buckhorn sits black and silent in the north, and the deep wounds on his shoulder are healing into grassy scars. He says nothing. Even the thunder now has a hollow sound. It is merely thunder.

But, as Arnek said, there are plenty of mountains.

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blind alley

by CHARLES L. FONTENAY

The agent for the Eastern Powers had an astonishing device for securing secrets; Dan Fairlane had courage and ingenuity—Both of them had too much time . . .

LEVERARD TRAPPED DAN FAIRlane by posing as a salesman of electronics equipment. That way, he not only gained access to Fairlane's Midwestern laboratory, but he was able to bring the translator in with him as a piece of demonstration equipment.

There were guards in front of the building and before the door of Fairlane's private office, of course, but they let the translator go in with him when he showed his fake credentials. The original owner of the credentials was in the river, dead. They searched him for weapons, and, of course, found him unarmed. He had taken care of that differently.

"It's a very compact powerpack," Leverard said, telling part of the truth as he set the translator on Fairlane's big desk. "As you see, it isn't plugged in anywhere. Now, I'll demonstrate its operation."

Fairlane leaned forward to watch the control board as Leverard flicked the switch. Both Fairlane and Leverard, together with the desk and Fairlane's chair, were within the radius of the translator's effectiveness.

The walls of the office, its furnishings and fixtures, disappeared from around them in that instant. They were on the tiny island, its shores lapped by a red sea, which had become familiar to Leverard. He had kidnaped Fairlane from the midst of his armed guards.

Leverard stooped and scooped the pistol from the ground, where he had placed it carefully the last time he was on the island. He levelled it at Fairlane, just in time. Fairlane's astonishment had not hampered his lightning reactions. The scientist's hand already was in his desk drawer.

"Raise your hands, empty, and back away from the desk," warned Leverard. Fairlane complied. Leverard followed him. To be sure that Fairlane was not armed, he made Fairlane strip and throw his

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clothes to one side. He went to the desk, found Fairlane's Luger and hurled it into the red sea, forty feet away.

"Stay back from the desk—at least twenty feet," Leverard ordered. When Fairlane moved back farther, Leverard sat on the edge of the desk, toying with his weapon.

"It is a power-pack, Fairlane," he said, "but it's more. It has a self-contained power unit, but, within its effective radius, it displaces matter out of the normal space-time field. It probably works on a principle similar to your matter-transmitter. It isn't my invention, but I can assure you from experience it works very effectively."

Fairlane looked around him curiously. The island was bare except for a grass-like purple vegetation. The red sea stretched in every direction, and near the horizon a lavender sun hovered.

"Where are we?" asked Fairlane.

"All I can tell you is that we're somewhere completely outside of our normal space-time framework," answered Leverard. "When we reverse the switch and return to space-time, we enter it at the point of least resistance—which is the point one infinitesimal instant after we left it, before the air can rush in to fill the vacuum left by our departure.

"It works in reverse, too. If we leave this island and return to it, we return at the instant we left, even if we should meanwhile live years in our own space-time."

"Theoretically possible," admitted Fairlane thoughtfully. "But your attitude indicates you didn't bring me here just for a demonstration, Mr. . . ."

"Leverard. No, I didn't. I want the specifications for your matter-transmitter."

"You're an agent for the Eastern Powers," accused Fairlane.

Leverard inclined his head.

"It doesn't matter what I am, Fairlane. You may as well do as I say. There's something you should know: I can return to space-time without you, if you are out of the translator's range.

"I can keep you here until you starve. Meanwhile, I can return to space-time, eat, sleep, live a normal life—and my return here will be the instant I left, so you'll have no chance to get any closer to me."

"I can hardly be expected to take your word for that," retorted Fairlane with a wry grin.

"No? I'll give you a demonstration. I'll return to space-time, change clothes and be back in an instant. Note carefully what I'm wearing."

He gave Fairlane a moment to study his attire. Then he reversed the switch. Fairlane was well out of range.

Leverard was back in Fairlane's

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office, the translator on Fairlane's desk.

But across the desk from him stood Fairlane, naked!

For an instant, Leverard thought that Fairlane somehow had been within the radius of the translator's effective area and returned with him. Then he realized what had happened.

The Fairlane of *now* was still stranded on the island in the red sea. But later, Fairlane would, somehow, be returned to space-time. And, returning, naturally he returned to the same instant he left.

So this was a Fairlane of a later time, after Leverard had gone back to the island, after they had negotiated. The thing that puzzled Leverard was that he fully intended to leave Fairlane stranded on the barren island, after he got the matter-transmitter specifications, and Fairlane shouldn't be back at all.

Leverard still had the pistol. He held it on Fairlane while he thought furiously. Fairlane looked a bit puzzled at first, then his brow cleared. He evidently had figured it out, too.

"You must have given me the specifications for the matter-transmitter," Leverard said slowly, "or you'd still be up there, at pistol-point. Isn't that right?"

"You wouldn't remember, would you?" countered Fairlane. "You couldn't, because it hasn't happened to you yet. Yes, I did even better, Leverard. I made a matter-transmitter for you."

Suddenly Leverard saw it in a flash—why, later, he was to decide to bring Fairlane back instead of leaving him up there to die. Fairlane was his ticket out of the building, through the ring of guards.

But what had made him decide he couldn't just walk out, a departing salesman? And why hadn't he made Fairlane dress?

Well, he couldn't leave Fairlane here now to arouse the guards.

"Got any clothes here?" he asked Fairlane.

"Another suit in the closet."

"Put it on."

Fairlane dressed. With the translator under one arm, his other hand holding the gun on Fairlane in his coat pocket, Leverard forced Fairlane out of the building ahead of him. The guards let them through, and Fairlane made no effort to alert them.

"I'm surprised you didn't call the guards, even at the cost of your life," remarked Leverard.

"Not necessary," replied Fairlane cryptically.

A block away, Leverard made Fairlane turn into a blind alley. Ten feet down the alley, they stopped. There was no one in sight.

Leverard took the pistol out, and pointed it toward Fairlane.

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"Come closer, Fairlane," he ordered.

"Wait a minute," demurred Fairlane, backing away. Leverard was between him and the entrance to the alley. "I'm not going back to the island. You don't realize what you're doing."

"You can't get away," said Leverard. "It's a blind alley."

"There's a door—" said Fairlane, still retreating.

"There's death," replied Leverard. "I'll shoot."

Fairlane stopped and turned, spreading his hands in appeal. His face was pale.

"You don't understand," he said. "I've got to find the . . . that thing."

He pointed at the translator.

"It's here," said Leverard, advancing.

Fairlane backed away.

"No!" he exclaimed. "We'll both be dead!"

"Just you," said Leverard, "if you don't stop."

"Well," said Fairlane resignedly, "it's better quick." He turned and sprinted for the door at the end of the blind alley.

Leverard shot him down. He went over and examined Fairlane's body. Fairlane was quite dead.

That took care of Fairlane. There was no problem in disposing of the body. It was within range of the translator.

He flicked the switch.

He was back on the island. The red sea lapped at its shores. The lavender sun hung in the sky. Twenty feet away stood Fairlane, naked. The body was not in evidence, of course—it could not return until the instant this naked Fairlane left the island.

"Something came up," said Leverard. "I didn't get a chance to change my suit."

"Proof enough," said Fairlane quietly. "The desk and chair are gone."

So they were. Leverard had forgotten about them.

"Are you satisfied, then?" asked Leverard.

"I'm satisfied your machine works as you say it does," answered Fairlane.

"All right. Do you want to starve a while, or do I get the secret of the matter-transmitter without trouble?"

"Look, I'm sensible enough to bow to the inevitable," said Fairlane. "If I know it's inevitable, that is. But how do I know that, once you get what you want, you won't just leave me here anyhow? It would solve a lot of problems for you."

That gave Leverard a queer feeling. It was exactly what he had planned, originally. But now he had the answer.

"I need you to get me out of your guarded building," he said, still not sure why. "Look, Fairlane,

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remember I've already been back and I returned to the instant I left. You're going back, and you'll return to the instant you left. That's the same instant, so we met there.

"I can assure you that you will get back to space-time, and I can assure you from what you've already told me after you get back that you're going to give me the matter-transmitter. Not just the specifications, the transmitter itself."

Fairlane sat down on the grass and thought a while.

"Why don't you have the matter-transmitter then?" he asked at last.

"Because you haven't given it to me yet. Remember, when I was back, that was in my past but it was in your future. You told me then you had given me the matter-transmitter."

"I'll have to believe you," Fairlane said, "because the transmitter is so simple a proposition that it would be easier to make a small one than to draw the specifications without the proper instruments. All right, Leverard. Let me make you a list of the materials I need. If you'll get them for me, I'll make you a small transmitter."

A small transmitter was all Leverard needed—all that his country's scientists would need to figure out its workings. Maybe Fairlane was thinking of stopping him after he got back to space-time, but that die was cast. Fairlane didn't know it, but he was already dead.

What he still couldn't figure was why, after the transmitter was completed, he wouldn't just leave Fairlane here and have walked out of Fairlane's office alone. It was the simple way. But one couldn't change what had already happened in the future—or could one?

Leverard pulled out a pad and pencil and tossed it to Fairlane. Fairlane made out a fairly long list and tossed it back. Leverard returned to space-time.

Leverard was in the blind alley.

Fairlane's body was gone. That was explainable. Fairlane's body had left here when Leverard had left here before, and the body would appear on the island at that future moment when Fairlane would leave the island. And the fact that it was not here now, the instant after it had left, was proof that it would never be here—that Leverard would leave it forever on the island. Which was exactly what he planned to do.

Pleased by this indication of the success of his plans, Leverard went shopping. He had to visit every electric and electronic shop in town to find the things Fairlane wanted. It took him about two hours. At last the list was complete, and Leverard took all his purchases to his apartment.

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With the equipment in half a dozen bundles under his arm, Leverard activated the translator and returned to the island. Fairlane was sitting naked on the grass, twenty feet away.

Leverard took the packages halfway to Fairlane, put them down, and backed away.

"Pick them up and take them back where you are now," he commanded. "I want you to stay out of range of the translator. And, remember, you'll have to demonstrate this gadget to prove to me you're making one that works."

"I planned to do that," said Fairlane, advancing to pick up the materials. "I'll make two small sending and receiving stations, and transfer an object from one to the other of them over a distance of twenty or thirty feet."

It took Fairlane forty hours to do the job. And, since Leverard wanted his victim to make no mistakes, he allowed Fairlane to sleep twice. He even returned to his apartment in space-time and broiled steaks for both of them. It was quicker bringing the steaks back to the island than it would have been carrying them into the living room.

At last Fairlane finished. There were two identical cubicles, about a foot on each edge, one face of each covered with a mass of dials.

"These things don't have power built in them like your machine," said Fairlane. "Where can I get a power source in this God-forsaken place?"

"I told you this translator is a power-pack, and it is," replied Leverard. "You can plug them into it. But do you have enough wire to separate them by thirty feet?"

"The two stations of the matter-transmitter can transmit power, one to the other," said Fairlane. "We'll just have to plug in one of them."

"Good," said Leverard. "I'll keep one station over here, and you can send me something from the other station, where you are."

Fairlane took one of the small matter-transmitters to the halfway point, and went back to the other. Leverard thrust his pistol in his pocket, picked up the station, took it back and plugged it into one of the outlets on the translator's side. The matter-transmitter's power cable was only three inches long.

"What can I send?" asked Fairlane.

"Send me one of your shoes," said Leverard.

Fairlane picked up one of his shoes and put it in the cubicle of the station at his end.

"Stand away from the station," Fairlane warned. "You might get a shock."

Leverard backed away from the cubicle. Fairlane depressed a switch.

Leverard was watching the matter-transmitter station at his end.

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The translator vanished from beside it.

"The cubicle is a blind," said Fairlane calmly. "The matter-transmitter, like your machine, operates on objects wholly contained within a radius of about two feet. It transmits by switching the stations, one for the other!"

Appalled, Leverard looked toward him. The translator was in Fairlane's hands. In sending the shoe to him, Fairlane had transmitted the translator to himself!

Fairlane disconnected the transmitter and was edging away from Leverard and the transmitter, fumbling for the switch of the translator. Now Leverard realized how it was that Fairlane had returned naked to his office.

Leverard reached into his pocket frantically—and hopelessly—for his pistol.

Fairlane pressed the switch.

The translator was gone from the red island.

The red sea lapped at the shores of the island. The lavender sun was in the sky. A faint breeze riffled the purple grass. A crumpled form lay thirty feet away.

Fairlane had returned to space-time at the instant he left it—in his office, to be shot and killed in the blind alley by Leverard. The translator had returned at the instant *it* left—to Leverard's empty apartment.

If anybody, anywhere, were going to come to the red island with the translator that could take Leverard back to the world he knew . . . ever . . . they would be there that instant.

But he was alone on the island—except for the two small matter-transmitters, a heap of clothing, a few dirty dishes, and Fairlane's dead body. . . .

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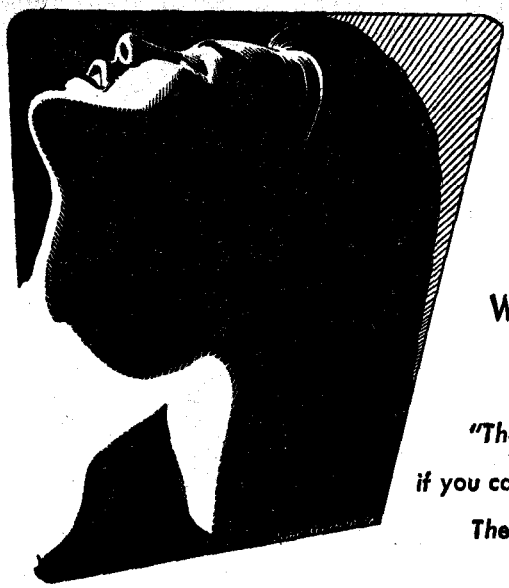

VENGEANCE FOR NIKOLAI

by

WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

"They will not kill you, grazhdanka, if you can get safely past the lines . . . They may do other things to you— forgive me! — it is war."

THE DISTANT THUNDER OF THE artillery was only faintly audible in the dugout. The girl sat quietly picking at her hands while the colonel spoke. She was only a slip of a girl, all breast and eyes, but there was an intensity about her that made her unmistakably beautiful, and the colonel kept glancing at her sidelong as if his eyes refused to share the impersonal manner of his speech. The light of a single bare bulb glistened in her dark hair and made dark shadows under deep jade eyes already shadowed by weeping. She was listening intently or not at all. She had just lost her child.

"They will not kill you, *grazhdanka,* if you can get safely past the lines," said the colonel. He paced slowly in the dugout, his boot heels clicking pleasantly on the concrete while he sucked at a long cigaret holder and milked his thumbs behind his back in solemn thought. "These Americans, you have heard about their women? No, they will not kill you, unless by accident in passing the lines. They may do other

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things to you—forgive me!—it is war." He stopped pacing, straddled her shadow, and looked down at her with paternal pity. "Come, you have said nothing, nothing at all. I feel like a swine for asking it of you, but there is no other hope of beating back this attack. And I am ordered to ask you. Do you understand?"

She looked up. Light filled her eyes and danced in them with the moist glittering of a fresh grief already an ancient grief old as Man. "They killed my Nikolai," she said softly. "Why do you speak to me so? What can it mean? The bombardment—I know nothing—I cannot think of it. Why do you torment me?"

The colonel betrayed no impatience with her, although he had gone over it twice before. "This morning you tried to leap off the bridge. It is such a shame to die without purpose, *dushka.* I offer you a purpose. Do you love the Fatherland?"

"I am not a Party member, *Tovarish Polkovnik.*"

"I did not ask if you love the Party, my dear. However, you should say *'parties,'* now that we are tolerating those accursed Menshevist deviationists again. Bah! *They* even name members of the *Gorodskoi* Soviets these days. We are becoming a two party republic. How sickening! Where are the old warrior Bolsheviks? It makes one weep. . . . But that is not the question. I asked if you love the Fatherland."

She gave a hesitant nod.

"Then think of the Fatherland, think of vengeance for Nikolai. Would you trade your life for that? I know you would. You were ready to fling it away."

She stirred a little; her mind seemed to re-enter the room. "This Ami *Gyenyeral.* Why do you wish him dead?"

"He is the genius behind this assault, my child. Who would have thought the Americans would have chosen such an unlikely place for an invasion? And the manner of it! They parachuted an army ninety miles inland, instead of assaulting the fortified coastline. He committed half a million troops to deliberate encirclement. Do you understand what this means? If they had been unable to drive to the coast, they would have been cut off, and the war would very likely be over. With *our* victory. As it was, the coast defenders panicked. The airborne army swept to the sea to capture their beachhead without need of a landing by sea, and now there are two million enemy troops on our soil, and we are in full retreat. *Flight* is a better word. General Rufus MacAmsward gambled his country's entire future on one operation, and he won. If he had lost, they would likely have shot him. Such a man is necessarily mad. A megalomaniac, an evil genius.

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Oh, I admire him very much! He reminds me of one of their earlier generals, thirty years ago. But that was before their Fascism, before their Blue Shirts.

"And if he is killed?"

The colonel sighed. He seemed to listen for a time to the distant shellfire. "We are all a little superstitious in wartime," he said at last. "Perhaps we attach too much significance to this one man. But they have no other generals like *him*. He will be replaced by a competent man. We would rather fight competent men than fight an unpredictable devil. He keeps his own counsels, that is so. We know he does not rely heavily upon his staff. His will rules the operation. He accepts intelligence but not advice. If he is struck dead—well, we shall see."

"And I am to kill him. It seems unthinkable. How do you know I can?"

The colonel waved a sheaf of papers. "Only a woman can get to him. We have his character clearly defined. Here is his psychoanalytic biography. We have photostats of medical records taken from Washington. We have interviews with his ex-wife and his mother. Our psychologists have studied every inch of him. Here, I'll read you—but no, it is very dry, full of psychiatric jargon. I'll boil it down.

"MacAmsward is a champion of the purity of womanhood, and yet he is a vile old lecher. He is at once a baby and an old man. He will kneel and kiss your hand—yes, really. He is a worshipper of womanhood. He will court you, convert you, pay you homage, and then expect you to—forgive me—to take him to bed. He could not possibly make advances on you uninvited, but he expects you—as a goddess rewarding a worshipper—to make advances on *him*. He will be your abject servant, but with courtly dignity. His life is full of breast symbols. He clucks in his sleep. He has visited every volcano in the world. He collects anatomical photographs; his women have all been bosomy brunettes. He is still in what the Freudians call the oral stage of emotional development—emotionally a two-year-old. I know Freud is bad politics, but for the Ami, it is sometimes so."

The colonel stopped. There was a sudden tremor in the earth. The colonel lurched, lost his balance. The floor heaved him against the wall. The girl sat still, hands in her lap, face very white. The air shock followed the earth shock, but the thunder clap was muted by six feet of concrete and steel. The ceiling leaked dust.

"Tactical A-missile," the colonel hissed. "Another of them! If they keep it up, they'll drive us to use Lucifer. This is a mad dog war. Neither side uses the H-bomb, but in the end one side or the other will have to use it. If the Kremlin

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sees certain defeat, we'll use it. So would Washington. If you're being murdered, you might as well take your killer with you if you can. Bah! It is a madness. I, Porphiry Grigoryevich, am as mad as the rest. Listen to me, Marya Dmitriyevna, I met you an hour ago, and now I am madly in love with you, do you hear? Look at you! Only a day after a bomb fragment dashed the life out of your baby, your bosom still swelled with unclaimed milk and dumb grief, and yet I dare stand here and say I am in love with you, and in another breath ask you to go and kill yourself by killing an Ami general! Ah, ah! What insane apes we are! Forget the Ami general. Let us both desert, let us run away to Africa together, to Africa where apes are simpler. There! I've made you cry. What a brute is Phorphiry, what a brute!"

The girl breathed in gasps. "Please, *Tovarish Polkovnik!* Please say nothing more! I will go and do what you ask, if it is possible."

"I only ask it, *dushka,* I cannot command it. I advise you to refuse."

"I will go and kill him. Tell me how! There is a plan? There must be a plan. How shall I pass the lines? How shall I get to him? What is the weapon? How can I kill him?"

"The weapon, you mean? The medical officer will explain that. Of course, you'll be too thoroughly searched to get even a stickpin past the lines. They often use fluoroscopy, so you couldn't even swallow a weapon and get it past them. But there's a way, there's a way— I'll let the *vrach* explain it. I can only tell you how to get captured, and how to get taken to MacAmsward after your capture. As for the rest of it, you will be directed by post-hypnotic suggestion. Tell me, you were an officer in the Woman's Defense Corps, the home guard, were you not?"

"Yes, but when Nikki was born, they asked for my resignation."

"Yes, of course, but the enemy needn't find out you're inactive. You have your uniform still? . . . Good! Wear it. Your former company is in action right now. You will join them briefly."

"And be captured?"

"Yes. Bring nothing but your ID tags. We shall supply the rest. You will carry in your pocket a certain memorandum addressed to all home guard unit commanders. It is in a code the Ami have already broken. It contains the phrase: 'Tactical bacteriological weapons immediately in use.' Nothing else of any importance. It is enough. It will drive them frantic. They will question you. Since you know nothing, they can torture nothing out of you.

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"In another pocket, you will be carrying a book of love poetry. Tucked in the book will be a photograph of General Rufus MacAmsward, plus two or three religious ikons. Their Intelligence will *certainly* send the memorandum to MacAmsward; both sides are that nervous about germ weapons. It is most probably that they will send him the book and the picture—for reasons both humorous and practical. The rest will take care of itself. MacAmsward is all ego. Do you understand?"

She nodded. Porphiry Grigoryevich reached for the phone.

"Now I am going to call the surgeon," he said. "He will give you several injections. Eventually, the injections will be fatal, but for some weeks, you will feel nothing from them. Post-hypnotic urges will direct you. If your plan works, you will not kill MacAmsward in the literal sense. Literally, he will kill himself. If the plan fails, you'll kill him another way if you can. You were an actress, I believe?"

"For a time. I never got to the Bolshoi."

"But excellent! His mother was an actress. You speak English. You are beautiful, and full of grief. It is enough. You are the one. But do you really love the Fatherland enough to carry it out?"

Her eyes burned. "I hate the killers of my son!" she whispered.

The colonel cleared his throat. "Yes, of course. Very well, Marya Dmitriyevna, it is death I am giving you. But you will be sung in our legends for a thousand years. And by the way—" He cocked his head and looked at her oddly. "I believe I really do love you, *dushka.*"

With that, he picked up the phone.

Strange exhilaration surged within her as she crawled through the brush along the crest of the flood embankment, crawled hastily, panting and perspiring under a smoky sun in a dusty sky while Ami fighters strafed the opposite bank of the river where her company was retreating. The last of the Russ troops had crossed, or were killed in crossing. The terrain along the bank where she crawled was now the enemy's. There was no lull in the din of battle, and the ugly belching of artillery mingled with the sound of the planes to batter the senses with a merciless avalanche of noise; but the Ami infantry and mechanized divisions had paused for regrouping at the river. It would be a smart business for the Americans to plunge on across the river at once before the Russians could reorganize and prepare to defend it, but perhaps they could not. The assault had carried the Ami forces four hundred miles in-

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land, and it had to stop somewhere and wait for the supply lines to catch up. Marya's guess—and it was the educated guess of a former officer—was that the Ami would bridge the river immediately under air cover and send mechanized killer-strikes across to harass the retreating Russ without involving infantry in an attempt to occupy territory beyond the river.

She fell flat and hugged the earth as machine gun fire traversed the ridge. A tracer hit rock a yard from her head, spraying her with dust, and sang like a snapped wire as it shot off to the south. The spray of bullets travelled on along the ridge. She moved ahead again.

The danger was unreal. It was all part of an explosive symphony. She had the manna. She could not be harmed. Nothing but vengeance lay ahead. She had only to crawl on.

Was it the drug that made her think like that? Was there an euphoric mixed in the injections? She had felt nothing like this during the raids. During the raids there was only fear, and the struggle to remember whether she had left the teapot boiling while the bombs blew off.

Macbeth. Once she had played Lady Macbeth upon the Moscow stage. How did it go? *The raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements. Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me, from crown to toe, top-full of direst cruelty!*

But that wasn't quite it. That wasn't quite what she felt. It was a new power that dwelt in her bosom. It was something else.

Her guard uniform was caked with mud, and the insignia was torn loose from her collar. The earth scuffed her knees and the brush scratched her arms. She kept falling flat to avoid the raking fire of her own machine guns. And yet it was necessary that she stay on the ridge and appear to be seeking a way across the river.

She was too intent upon watching the other side to notice the sergeant. She crawled over a corpse and nearly fell in the foxhole with him. She had been crawling along with her pistol in hand, and the first she saw of the sergeant was his boot. It stamped down on her gun hand. He jammed the muzzle of a tommy-gun against the side of her throat.

"Drop it, sister! *Voyennoplyennvi!*"

She gasped in pain—her hand—and stared up at him with wide eyes. A lank young Ami with curly hair and a quid of tobacco in one cheek.

"*Moya rooka*—my hand!"

He kept his boot heel on the gun, but let her get her hand free. "Get down in here!"

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She rolled into the hole. He kicked the gun toward the river.

"Hey, Cap!" he yelled over his shoulder. "I got a guest. One of the commissar's ladies." Then to the girl: "Before I kill you, what are you doing on this side of the river, spy?"

"Most chyeryez ryekoo . . ."

"I don't speak it. No savvy. *Ya nye govoryu . . ."*

Marya was suddenly terrified. He was lean and young and pale with an unwelcome fear that would easily allow him to fire a burst into her body at close range. The Ami forces had been taking no prisoners during the running battle. The papers called them sub-human beasts because of it, but Marya was sufficiently a soldier to know that prisoners of war were a luxury for an army with stretchy logistic problems, and often the luxury could not be afforded. One Russian lieutenant had brought his men to the Ami under a white flag, and the Ami captain had shot him in the face and ordered his platoon to pick off the others with rifle fire as they tried to flee. In a sense, it was retaliatory. The Russians had taken no prisoners during the Ami airborne landings, and she had seen some Ami airmen herded together and machine-gunned. She hated it. But as an officer, she knew there were times of necessity.

"Please don't shoot," she said in English. "I give up. I can't get across the river anyway."

"What are you doing on this side?" he demanded.

"My company was retreating across the bridge. I was the last to start across. Your artillery hit the bridge. The jets finished it off with their rockets." She had to shout to be heard above the roar of battle. She pointed down the river. "I was trying to make it down to the ford. Down there you can wade across."

It was all true. The sergeant thought it over.

"Hey, Cap!" he yelled again. "Didn't you hear me? What'll I do with her?"

If there was an answer, it was drowned by shellfire.

"Undress!" the sergeant barked.

"What?"

"I said to take off your clothes. And no tricks. Strip to the skin."

She went sick inside. So now it started, did it? Well, let it come! For the Fatherland! For Nikolai. She began unbuttoning her blouse. She did not look at the Ami sergeant. Once he whistled softly. When she had finished undressing, she looked up defiantly. His face had changed. He moistened his lips and swore softly under his breath. He crossed himself and edged away. Deep within her, something smiled. He was only a boy.

"Well, what are you cursing about?" she asked tonelessly.

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"If I didn't think you would I mean I wish this gun if I had time I'd but you'd stab me in the back but when I think about what they'll do to you back there . . .

"Jeezis!" he said fervently, wagging his head and rolling his quid into the other cheek. "Put the underwear and the blouse back on, roll up the rest of it, and start crawling down the slope. Aim for that slit trench down there. I'll be right behind you."

"She's quite a little dish, incidentally," the Ami captain was saying on the field telephone. "Are we shooting prisoners now, or are we sending them back . . . Yeah?" He listened for awhile. A mortar shell came screaming down nearby and they all sat down in the trench and opened their mouths to save eardrums. "To who?" he said when it was over. "Slim? Oh, to you . . . Yeah, that's right, a photograph of Old Brass Butt in person. I can't read the other stuff. It's in Russky. . . . Just a minute." He covered the mouthpiece and looked up at the sergeant. "Where's the rest of your squad, Sarge?"

The sergeant swallowed solemnly. "I lost all my men except Price and Vittorio, sir. They were wounded and went to the rear."

"Damn! Well, they're sending up replacements tonight, and we're all going back for a breather, as soon as they get here. So you might as well march her on back yourself." He glanced thoughtfully at the girl. "Good God!" he murmured.

Marya was surrounded by several officers. They were all looking at her hungrily. She thought quickly.

"You have searched me," she said cooly. "Would you gentlemen allow me to put on my skirt? I have submitted to capture. As an officer, I expect . . ."

"Look, lady, what you expect doesn't matter a damn!" snapped a lieutenant. "You're a prisoner of war, and you're lucky to be alive. Besides, you are now about to have the high privilege of lying down with six . . ."

"Quiet, Sam!" grunted the captain. "We can't do it. Lady, put on the rest of your clothes and get going."

"*Why?*" the lieutenant yelled. "That damned sergeant is going to . . ."

"Shut up! Can't you see she's no peasant? Christ, man, this war doesn't make you *all* swine, does it? Sergeant, trade that Chicago typewriter for a forty-five, and take her back to Major Kline for interrogation. Don't touch her, you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

The captain scribbled an order in his notebook, tore out the page, and handed it to the sergeant. "You can probably hitch a ride on the chow wagon part of the way.

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It's going to get dark pretty soon, so keep a leash on her. If anybody starts a gang rape, blow his guts out." He grinned ruefully. "If we are going to pass it up ourselves, by damn, I want to make sure nobody else does it." He glanced at the Russian girl and reddened. "My apologies, lieutenant. We're not really bastards. We're just a long way from home. After we wipe out this Red Disease (he spat out the words like bites of tainted meat) you'll see we're not so bad. I hope you'll be treated like an officer and a gentlewoman, even if you are a commie." He bowed slightly and offered the first salute.

"But I'm not—well, thank you, Captain," she said, and returned the salute. . . .

They sat spraddle-legged in the back of the truck as it bounced along the shell-pocked road. The guns had fallen silent, but the sky was full of Ami squadrons jetting toward the sunset. Pilotless planes and rocket missiles painted swift vapor trails across the heavens, and the sun colored them with blood. She breathed easier now, and she was very tired. The Ami sergeant sat across from her and kept his gun trained on her and appeared very ill-at-ease. He blushed several times for no apparent cause. She tried to shut him out of her consciousness and think of nothing. He was a doggy sort of a pup, and she disliked him. The Ami were all doggy pups. She had met them before. There was something of the spaniel in them.

Nikolai, Nikolai, my breasts ache for you, and they burst with your milk, and I must drain them before I die of it. My baby, my bodykins, my flesh torn from my flesh, my baby, my pain, my Nikki Andreyevich, come milk me—but no, now it is death, and we can be one again. How wretched it is to ache with milk and mourn you . . .

"Why are you crying?" the sergeant grunted after awhile.

"You killed my baby."

"I what?"

"Your bombers. They killed my baby. Only yesterday."

"Damnation! So that's why you're—" He looked at her blouse and reddened again.

She glanced down at herself. She was leaking a little, and the pressure was maddening. So that's what he was blushing about!

There was a crushed paper cup in the back of the truck. She picked it up and unfolded it, then glanced doubtfully at the sergeant. He was looking at her in a kind of mournful anguish.

"Do you mind if I turn my back?" she asked.

"Hell's bells!" he said softly, and put away his gun. "Give me your word you won't jump out, and I won't even look. This war gives me a sick knot in the gut."

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He stood up and leaned over the back of the cab, watching the road ahead and not looking at her, although he kept one hand on his holster and one boot heel on the hem of her skirt.

Marya tried to dislike him a little less than before. When she was finished, she threw out the cup and buttoned her blouse again. "Thank you, sergeant, you can turn around now."

He sat down and began talking about his family and how much he hated the war. Marya sat with her eyes closed and her head tilted back in the wind and tried not to listen.

"Say, how can you have a baby and be in the army?" he asked after a time.

"Not the army. The home guard. Everybody's in the home guard. Please, won't you just be quiet awhile?"

"Oh. Well. Sure, I guess."

Once they bailed out of the truck and lay flat in the ditch while two Russian jets screamed over at low altitude, but the jets were headed elsewhere and did not strafe the road. They climbed back in the truck and rolled on. They stopped at two road blocks for MP shakedowns before the truck pulled up at a supply dump. It was pitch dark.

The sergeant vaulted out of the truck. "This is as far as we ride," he told her. "We'll have to walk the rest of the way. It's dark as the devil, and we're only allowed a penlight." He flashed it in her face. "It would be a good chance for you to try to break for it. I hate to do this to you, sis, but put your hands together behind your back."

She submitted to having her wrists bound with telephone wire. She walked ahead of him down the ditch while he pointed the way with the feeble light and held one end of the wire.

"I'd sure hate to shoot you, so please don't try anything."

She stumbled once and felt the wire jerk taut.

"You've cut off the circulation; do you want to cut off the hands?" she snapped. "How much farther do we have to go?"

The sergeant seemed very remorseful. "Stop a minute. I want to think. It's about four miles." He fell silent. They stood in the ditch while a column of tanks thundered past toward the front. There was no traffic going the other way.

"Well?" she asked after awhile.

"I was just thinking about the three Russky women they captured on a night patrol awhile back. And what they did to them at interrogation."

"Go on."

"Well, it's the Blue Shirt boys that make it ugly, not so much the army officers. It's the political heel snappers you've got to watch out for. They see red and hate Russky. Listen, it would be a lot

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safer for you if I took you in after daylight, instead of at night. During the day, there's sometimes a Red Cross fellow hanging around, and everybody's mostly sober. If you tell everything you know, then they won't be so rough on you."

"Well?"

"There's some deserted gun emplacements just up the hill here, and an old command post. I guess I could stay awake until dawn."

She paused, wondered whether to trust him. No, she shouldn't. But even so, he would be easier to handle than half a dozen drunken officers.

"All right, Ami, but if you don't take these wires off, your medics will have to amputate my hands."

They climbed the hill, crawled through splintered logs and burned timbers, and found the command post underground. Half the roof was caved in, and the place smelled of death and cartridge casings, but there was a canvas cot and a gasoline lantern that still had some fuel in it. After he had freed her wrists, she sat on the cot and rubbed the numbness out of her hands while he opened a K-ration and shared it with her. He watched her rather wistfully while she ate.

"It's too bad you're on the wrong side of this war," he said. "You're okay, as Russkies go. How come you're fighting for the commies?"

She paused, then reached down and picked up a handful of dirt from the floor, kneaded it, and showed it to him, while she nibbled cheese.

"Ami, this has the blood of my ancestors in it. This ground is mine. Now it has the blood of my baby in it; don't speak to me of sides, or leaders, or politics." She held the soil out to him. "Here, look at it. But don't touch. It's mine. No, when I think about it, go ahead and *touch*. Feel it, smell it, taste a little of it the way a peasant would to see if it's ripe for planting. I'll even give you a handful of it to take home and mix with your own. It's mine to give. It's also mine to fight for." She spoke calmly and watched him with deep jade eyes. She kept working the dirt in her hand and offering it to him. "Here! This is Russia. See how it crumbles? It's what they'll bury you in. Here, take it." She tossed it at him. He grunted angrily and leaped to his feet to brush himself off

Marya went on eating cheese. "Do you want an argument, Ami?" she asked, chewing hungrily while she talked. "You will get awfully dirty, if you do. I have a simple mind. I can only keep tossing handfuls of Russia at you to answer your ponderous questions."

He did an unprecedented thing. He sat down on the floor and began—well, almost sobbing. His shoulders heaved convulsively for

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a moment. Marya stopped eating cheese and stared at him in amazement. He put his arms across his knees and rolled his forehead on them. When he looked up, his face was blank as a frightened child's.

"God, I want to go home!" he croaked.

Marya put down the K-ration and went to bend over him. She pulled his head back with a handful of his hair and kissed him. Then she went to lie down on the cot and turned her face to the wall.

"Thanks, Sergeant," she said. "I hope they don't bury you in it after all."

When she awoke, the lantern was out. She could see him bending over her, silhouetted against the stars through the torn roof. She stifled a shriek.

"Take your hands away!"

He took them away at once and made a choking sound. His silhouette vanished. She heard him stumbling among the broken timbers, making his way outside. She lay there thinking for awhile, thoughts without words. After a few minutes, she called out.

"Sergeant? Sergeant!"

There was no answer. She started up and kicked something that clattered. She went down on her knees and felt for it in the dark. Finally she found it. It was his gun.

"*Sergeant!*"

After awhile he came stumbling back. "Yes?" he asked softly.

"Come here."

His silhouette blotted the patch of stars again. She felt for his holster and shoved the gun back in it.

"Thanks, Ami, but they would shoot you for that."

"I could say you grabbed it and ran."

"Sit down, Ami."

Obediently he sat.

"Now give me your hands again," she said, then, whispering: "No, please! Not there! Not there."

The last thing would be vengeance and death, but the next to the last thing was something else. And it was clearly in violation of the captain's orders.

It was the beating of the old man that aroused her fury. They dragged him out of the bunker being used by Major Kline for questionings, and they beat him about the head with a piece of hydraulic hose. "They" were immaculately tailored Blue Shirts of the Americanist Party, and "he" was an elderly Russian major of near retirement age. Two of them held his arms while the third kicked him to his knees and whipped him with the hose.

"Just a little spanking, commie, to learn you how to recite for teacher, see?"

"Whip the bejeezis out of him."

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"Fill him with gasoline and stick a wick in his mouth."

"Give it to him!"

They were very methodical about it, like men handling an unruly circus animal. Marya stood in line with a dozen other prisoners, waiting her turn to be interrogated. It was nine in the morning, and the sun was evaporating the last of the dew on the tents in the camp. The sergeant had gone into the bunker to report to Major Kline and present the articles her captors had taken from her person. He had been gone ten minutes. When he came out, the Blue Shirts were still whipping the prisoner. The old man had fainted.

"He's faking."

"Wake him up with it, Mac. Teach him."

The sergeant walked straight toward her but gave no sign of recognition. He did not look toward the whistle and slap of the hose, although his face seemed slightly pale. He drew his gun in approaching the prisoners and a guard stepped into his path.

"Halt! You can't . . ."

"Major Kline's orders, Corporal. He'll see Marya Dmitriyevna Lisitsa next. Right now. I'm to show her in."

The guard turned blankly to look at the prisoners.

"*That* one," said the sergeant.

"The girl? Okay, you! *Shagom marsh!*"

She stepped out of line and went with the sergeant, who took her arm and hissed, "Make it easy on yourself," out of the corner of his mouth. Neither looked at the other.

It was dark in the bunker, but she could make out a fat little major behind the desk. He had a poker expression and a small moustache. He kept drumming his fingers on the desk and spoke in comic grunts.

"So this is the wench," he muttered at the sergeant. He stared at Marya for a moment, then thundered: "Attention! Hit a brace! Has nobody taught you how to salute?"

Her fury congealed into a cold knot. She ignored the command and refused to answer in his own language. *"Ya nye govoryu po Angliiski!"* she snapped.

"I thought you said she spoke English," he grunted at the sergeant. "I thought you said you'd talked to her."

She felt the sergeant's fingers tighten on her arm. He hesitated. She heard him swallow. Then he said, "Yes sir, I did. Through an interpreter."

Bless you, little sergeant! she thought, not daring to look her thanks at him.

"Hoy, McCoy!" the major bellowed toward the door.

The man who came in was not McCoy, but one of the Americanist Blue Shirts. He gave the major

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a cross-breasted Americanist salute and barked the slogan: *"Ameh'ca Fust!"*

"America First," echoed the major without vigor and without returning the political salute. "What is it now?"

"I regrets to repoaht, suh, that the cuhnel is dead of a heaht condition, and can't answeh moa questions."

"I told you to loosen him up, not kill him. Damn! Well, no help for it. Get him out. That's all, Purvis, that's all."

"Ameh'ca Fust!"

"Yeah."

The Blue Shirt smacked his heels, whirled, and hiked out. The interpreter came in.

"McCoy, I hate this job. Well, there she is. Take a gander. She's the one with the bacteriological memo and the snap of MacAmsward. I'm scared to touch it. They'll want this one higher up. Look at her. A fine piece, eh?"

"Distinctly, sir," said McCoy, who looked legal and regal and private-school-polished.

"Yes, well, let's begin. Sergeant, wait oustide till we're through."

She was suddenly standing alone with them, eyes bright with fury.

"Why did you begin using bacteriological weapons?" Kline barked.

The interpreter repeated the question in Russian. The question was a silly beginning. No one had yet made official accusations of germ warfare. She answered with a crisp sentence, causing the interpreter to make a long face.

"She says they are using such weapons because they dislike us, sir."

The major coughed behind his hand. "Tell her what will happen to her if she does that again. Let's start over." He squinted at her. "Name?"

"Imya?" echoed McCoy.

"Marya Dmitriyevna."

"Familiya?"

"Lisitsa."

"It means 'fox', sir. Possibly a lie."

"Well, Marya Dmitriyevna Fox, what's your rank?"

"V kakom vy chinye?" snapped McCoy.

"Starshii Lyeityenant," said the girl.

"Senior lieutenant, sir."

"You see, girl? It's all straight from Geneva. Name, rank, serial number, that's all. You can trust us. . . . Ask her if she's with Intelligence."

"Razvye'dyvatyel naya sluzhba?"

"Nyet!"

"Nyet, eh? How many divisions are ready at the front?"

"Skol'ko na frontye divizii?"

"Ya nye pomnyu!"

"She says she doesn't remember."

"Who is your battalion commander, Lisitsa?"

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"Kto komandir va'shyevo batalyona?"

"Ya nye pomnyu!"

"She says she doesn't remember."

"Doesn't, eh? Tell her I know she's a spy, and we'll shoot her at once."

The interpreter repeated the threat in Russian. The girl folded her arms and stared contempt at the major.

"You're to stand at attention!"

"Smirno!"

She kept her arms folded and stood as she had been standing. The major drew his forty-five and worked the slide.

"Tell her that I am the sixteenth bastard grandson of Mickey Spillane and blowing holes in ladies' bellies is my heritage and my hobby."

The interpreter repeated it. Marya snorted three words she had learned from a fisherman.

"I think she called you a castrate, sir."

The major lifted the automatic and took casual aim. Something in his manner caused the girl to go white. She closed her eyes and murmured something reverent in favor of the Fatherland.

The gun jumped in Kline's hand. The crash brought a yell from the sergeant outside the bunker. The bullet hit concrete out the doorway and screamed off on a skyward ricochet. The girl bent over and grabbed at the front of her skirt. There was a bullet hole in front and in back where the slug had passed between her thighs. She cursed softly and fanned the skirt.

"Tell her I am a terrible marksman, but will do better next time," chuckled Kline. "Good thing the light shows through that skirt, eh, McCoy—or I might have burned the 'tender demesnes.' There! Is she still cursing me?"

"Fluently, sir."

"I must have burned her little white hide. Give her a second to cool off, then ask what division she's from."

"Kakovo vy polka?"

"Ya nye pomnyu!"

"She has a very poor memory, sir."

The major sighed and inspected his nails. They were grubby. "Tell her," he muttered, "that I think I'll have her assigned to C company as its official prostitute after our psychosurgeons make her a nymphomaniac."

McCoy translated. Marya spat. The major wrote.

"Have you been in any battles, woman?" he grunted.

"V kakikh srazhyeniyakh vy oochast'vovali?"

"Ya nye pomnyu!" . .

"She says—"

"Yeah, I know. It was a silly question." He handed the interpreter her file. "Give these to the sergeant and have him take her up to Purvis. I haven't the heart

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to whip information out of a woman. Slim's queer; he loves it." He paused, looking her over. "I don't know whether to feel sorry for her, or for Purvis. That's all, McCoy."

The sergeant led her to the Blue Shirts' tent. "Listen," he whispered. "I'll sneak a call to the Red Cross." He appeared very worried in her behalf.

The pain lasted for several hours. She lay on a cot somewhere while a nurse and a Red Cross girl took blood samples and smears. They kept giving each other grim little glances across the cot while they ministered to her.

"We'll see that the ones who did it to you are tried," the Red Cross worker told her in bad Russian.

"I speak English," Marya muttered, although she had never admitted it to her interrogators, not even to Purvis.

"You'll be all right. But why don't you cry?"

But she could only cry for Nikolai now, and even that would be over soon. She lay there for two days and waited.

After that, there was General MacAmsward, and a politer form of questioning. The answers, though, were still the same.

"Ya nye pomnyu!"

What quality or quantity can it be, laughably godlike, transubstantially apelike, that abides in the flesh of brutes and makes them men? For General MacAmsward was indeed a man, although he wished to be only a soldier.

There are militarists who love the Fatherland, and militarists who love the Motherland, and the difference between them is as distinct as the difference between the drinkers of bourbon and the drinkers of rye. There are the neo-Prussian zombies in jackboots who stifle their souls to make themselves machines of the Fatherland, but MacAmsward was not one of them. MacAmsward was a Motherland man, and Mother was never much interested in machines. Mother raised babies into champions, and a champion is mightier than the State; never is he a tool of the State. So it was with Rufus MacAmsward, evil genius by sworn word of Porphiry Grigoryevich.

Consider a towering vision of Michael the Archangel carrying a swagger stick. Fresh from the holy wars of Heaven he comes, striding past the rows of white gloved orderlies standing at saber salute, their haloes (M-1, official nimbus) studded with brass spikes. The archangel's headgear is a trifle rakish, crusted with gold laurel and dented by a dervish devil's bullet. He ignores the thrones and dominations, but smiles democratically at a lowly cherub and pauses to inquire after

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the health of his grandmother.

Grandmother is greatly improved.

Immensely reassured, General MacAmsward strides into his quarters and hangs up his hat. The room is in darkness except for the light from a metal wall lamp that casts its glare around the great chair and upon the girl who sits in the great chair at the far end of the room. The girl is toying with a goblet of wine, and her dark hair coils in thick masses about her silk-clad shoulders. The silk came by virtue of the negligence of the general's ex-wife in forgetting to pack. The great chair came as a prize of war, having been taken from a Soviet People's Court where it is no longer needed. It is massive as an episcopal throne—a fitting seat for an archangel—and it is placed on a low dais at the head of a long table flanked by lesser chairs. The room is used for staff conference, and none would dare to sit in the great chair except the general—or, of course, a lovely grief-stung maiden.

The girl stares at him from out of two pools of shadow. Her head is slightly inclined and the downlight catches only the tip of her nose. The general pauses with his hand on his hat. He turns slowly away from the hat rack, brings himself slowly to attention, and gives her a solemn salute. It is a tribute to beauty. She acknowledges it with a nod. The general advances and sits in the simple chair at the far end of the long table. The general sighs with fervor, as if he had not breathed since entering the door. His eyes have not left her face. The girl puts down the glass.

"I have come to kill you," she said. "I have come to nurse you to death with the milk of a murdered child."

The general winced. She had said it three times before, once for each day she had resided in his house. And for the third time, the general ignored it.

"I have seen to it, my child," he told her gravely. "Captain Purvis faces court martial in the morning. I have directed it. I have directed too that you be repatriated forthwith, if it is your wish, for this is only common justice after what that monster has done to you. Now however let me implore you to remain with us and quit the forces of godlessness until the war is won and you can return to your home in peace."

Marya watched his shadowy figure at the far end of the table. He was like Raleigh at the court of Beth, at once mighty and humble. Again she felt the surge of exhilaration, as when she had crawled along the ridge at the river, ducking machine gun fire. It was the voice of Macbeth's wife whispering within her: *Come to my woman's breasts, and take my*

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milk for gall, you murdering ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief! It was the power of death in her bosom, where once had been the power of life.

She arose slowly and leaned on the table to stare at him fiercely. "Murderer of my child!" she hissed.

"May God in His mercy—"

"Murderer of my child!"

"Marya Dmitriyevna, it is my deepest sorrow." He sat watching her gravely and seemed to lose none of his lofty composure. "I can say nothing to comfort you. It is impossible. It is my deepest sorrow."

"There is something you can do."

"Then it is done. Tell me quickly."

"Come here." She stepped from the table to the edge of the dais and beckoned. "Come to me here. I have secrets to whisper to the killer of my son. Come."

He came and stood down from her so that their faces were at the same level. She could see now that there was real pain in his eyes. Good! Let it be. She must make him understand. He must know perfectly well that she was going to kill him. And he must know how. The necessity of knowing was not by any command of Porphiry's; it was a must that she had created within herself. She was smiling now, and there was a new quickness in her gestures.

"Look at me, high killer. I cannot show you the broken body of my son. I can show you no token or relic. It is all buried in a mass grave." Swiftly she opened the silk robe. "Look at me instead. See? How swollen I am again. Yes, here! A token after all. A single drop. Look, it is his, it is Nikolai's."

MacAmsward went white. He stood like a man hypnotized.

"See? To nourish life, but now to nourish death. Your death, high killer. But more! My son was conceived in love, and you have killed him, and now I come to you. You will give me another, you see. Now we shall conceive him in hate, you and I, and you'll die of the death in my bosom. Come, make hate to me, killer."

His jaw trembled. He took her shoulders and ran his hands down her arms and closed them over hers.

"Your hands are ice," he whispered, and leaned forward to kiss a bare spot just below her throat, and somehow she was certain that he understood. It was a preconscious understanding, but it was there. And still he bent over her.

Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes . . .

Of course the general had been intellectually convinced that it was entirely a figure of speech.

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The toxin's work was quickly done. A bacterial toxin, swiftly lethal to the non-immunized, slowly lethal to Marya who could pass it out in her milk as it formed. The general slept for half an hour and woke up with a raging fever. She sat by the window and watched him die. He tried to shout, but his throat was constricted. He got out of bed, took two steps, and fell. He tried to crawl toward the door. He fell flat again. His face was crimson.

The telephone rang.

Someone knocked at the door.

The ringing stopped and the knocking went away. She watched him breathe. He tried to speak, but she turned her back to him and looked out the window at the shell-pocked countryside. Russia, Nikolai, and even the Ami sergeant who had wanted to go home, it was for them that she listened to his gasping. She lit one of his American cigarets and found it very enjoyable. The phone was ringing furiously again. It kept on ringing.

The gasping stopped. Someone was hammering on the door and shouting. She stood enjoying the cigaret and watching the crows flocking in a newly planted field. The earth was rich and black here, the same soil she had tossed at the Ami sergeant. It belonged to her, this soil. Soon she would belong to it. With Nikolai, and maybe the Ami sergeant.

The door crashed loose from its hinges. Three Blue Shirts burst in and stopped. They looked at the body on the floor. They looked at Marya.

"What has happened here?"

The Russian girl laughed. Their expressions were quite comical. One of them raised his gun. He pulled the trigger six times.

"Come . . . Nikki Andreyevich . . . come . . ."

One of them went over and nudged her with his boot, but she was already dead. She had beaten them. She had beaten them all.

The American newspapers printed the truth. They said that General MacAmsward had died of poisoned milk. But that was all they said. The *whole* truth was only sung in Russian legend for the next one thousand years.

NOTE: If you've read Venturings *(see page 2) you have probably realized that we think that this issue of* Venture *contains a group of especially interesting and particularly varied tales. We would be grateful if you would drop us a line and let us know what you think of this month's stories. Just address* ***The Editor, Venture SF Magazine, 527 Madison Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y.***

Incidentally, the next issue of Venture *will be out on March 12th.*

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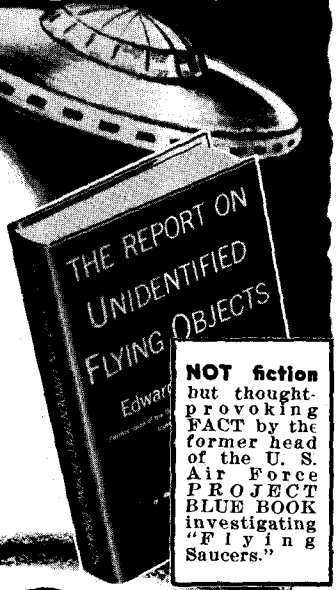

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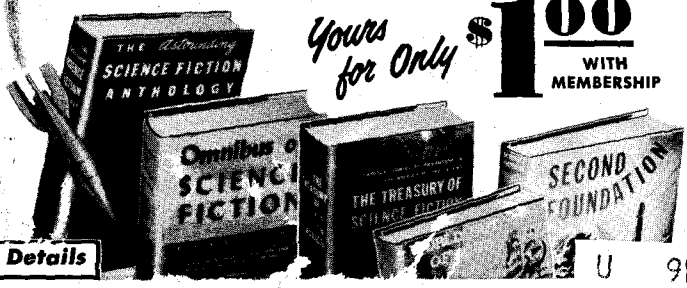

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